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THE COMPLETE BOOK

Blood and death and honor—courage, sympathy and love

COMBAT NURSE

(ROAD INLAND)

A realistic novel of men at war

by

FRIEDA K. FRANKLIN

THE POOR BLOODY INFANTRY...

They died all the way from Normandy to the Rhine. Lee Caine was one of the gallant women who nursed them, part of a combat surgery team.

Her operating room is the battlefield. Her patients are the wounded doughfoots of an infantry division slugging its way from the crimson beachheads to the bastions of the Nazi heartland.

She is a second lieutenant in blood-spattered battle dress fighting shoulder to shoulder with brave men. And yet she is still a woman – a beautiful woman who needs love.

Slowly Lee forgets her husband fighting in the Pacific. As the carnage grows, she is drawn to two others: to Major Collier, the brilliant battle surgeon who drives himself and his team without mercy; and to Bill Stainer, a young infantry lieutenant. He must soon return to combat, but he seeks with Lee a moment of pleasure amid the hells of war!

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Also by Frieda K. Franklin

THE CLEFT IN THE ROCK

COMBAT NURSE

(Original Title: ROAD INLAND)

FRIEDA K. FRANKLIN

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COMBAT NURSE

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To *Second Lieutenants*
GARNET L. THORNBERG, A.N.C.,
and WILLIAM D. BROWN, INF.

Proud we were,
And laughed, that had such brave true things to say.
And then you suddenly cried, and turned away.

—RUPERT BROOKE

COMBAT NURSE

CHAPTER 1

"Now hear this! Now hear this!"

Beneath the echo of the squawkboxes a distant muted thunder swelled on the offshore wind and mingled with the nearer slap of wave and cry of gull. The harsh voices of the loudspeakers grated on.

"Now hear this! ABLE Company, prepare to disembark!"

"Colonel Wilson! Colonel R. C. Wilson, please report to the bridge at once!"

The urgency of the voice tugged at the strained nerves of the waiting men. They stood jammed into an all but immovable mass on the transport deck; their gear, packs, helmets, gas masks, rifles seeming hopelessly intermeshed and tangled, while they, themselves, sagged with the inertia of the overloaded.

The transport, a rusty and badly camouflaged Victory ship, lay like a shadow on the shoreward edge of the ghostly fleet, gradually taking on outline and form as the gray murk of predawn faded from the sea. Long fingers of light began to slide through the surface mists to cast a weird metallic glow over the Channel. Beyond the black rim of Europe a leisurely sun rose, surprising the hundreds of ships anchored in a gigantic circle, their hulls darkening, becoming defined against the increasing color of the water.

Scores of small boats were splashing from ship to shore and back to ship again in a frenzy of activity. Men clambered up and down ladders and nets, dropped into heaving boats, leaned far over rails to shout hoarsely into megaphones, or stood like these on the transport and waited; resigned, heavy, excited and sad.

Far out, destroyers and corvettes, their sirens bleating feverishly, wheeled and circled, guarding the dangerous outskirts of their flocks. Above the whole strange scene barrage balloons, like plump sausages, rode in remote and ungainly dignity at the end of silver cables that caught and sparkled in the sudden light. On this day in early June, 1944, there were only two extremes: the frantic scramble of activity and passive waiting.

On the battered Victory the squawkboxes croaked again: "Colonel Wilson! Colonel R. C. Wilson!"

"The hell with Colonel Wilson!" a man mimicked savagely from beneath the massed helmets.

"Hey, ain't that women, Charlie?" asked a young soldier, who couldn't have been more than twenty. His round tanned face was drawn with fatigue, his heavy shoulders hunched beneath the weight of his gear.

"Sure. Didn'cha know they was aboard? Field Hospital Platoon and going ashore with us. Make you feel better, huh?"

"No . . . not exactly. Hell, I didn't see nothing of 'em."

"Where was you when they loaded at Weymouth?"

"Where you think? Packed like a damn sardine below decks!" The young soldier worked a smashed pack of cigarettes from the pocket of his stiff protective fatigues and turned to stare at the hospital group massed near the rail.

The platoon, one of the three separate and detachable units comprising the X Field Hospital, was a small medical group made up of three surgical and one shock teams plus sufficient corpsmen to supply this vital core with litter bearers, technicians, wardmen, mess personnel, and vehicle drivers. As a unit they were distinguishable from the massed soldiers by the large red crosses painted on white backgrounds on their helmets, and by the fact that they were weaponless. The five nurses of the platoon wore the same stiff olive green, gas-treated fatigues and strapped gear, and were only identifiable as women by their slighter builds, the incongruous gashes of bright lipstick beneath the shadow of their helmets.

"Jeez, they're all loaded down too! Funny, they gotta carry all that gear like the rest of us!"

"They're soldiers, aren't they? They're in the army? Hell, man, those nurses is officers! What you want to feel sorry for officers for?"

The young soldier grinned, showing very white teeth in the sweaty grime of his face. "There's a couple of mighty cute second lieutenants over yonder! Wish't that little one was platoon CO."

The nurse he was observing shifted her weight once more on aching legs and, removing her helmet suddenly as though she could not bear its weight another second, ran her fingers through her short blond hair, limp with salt and sweat and lying close to her small head. In the mellow light she seemed even younger than her twenty-three years. There was a look

of candor about the clear green eyes that gazed levelly from beneath brows slightly darker than her light cap of hair. Her skin was smooth and tanned and clear as a child's. Her features were regular, her lips generously made, mobile and quick to smile and touched a little by her inherent shyness. She was short, only an inch or two over five feet, with perfect square shoulders and full breasts. She was lovely with the perfection of youth, with the air of eagerness and expectancy with which she seemed to wait upon the world. The movements of her lithe body conveyed this sense of wistfulness even as her very alertness showed a caution that belied the grave candor of her eyes.

Lee Caine was on guard; she was wary, for life had taught her the lesson of constant watchfulness. It had taught her with small snubs that hurt, with little pin-pricks of pain against a normally happy enough disposition, and with the one great lesson of loneliness. Orphaned by a railroad-crossing accident at the age of four, she had felt not the hurt of this one great wound so much as a steady ache through the years of desertion. She had been taken as ward by an uncle who loved her and by his childless wife who did not, and had been brought up on a small ranch among the Colorado foothills where her uncle had done his best for her in spite of his dwindling economic resources.

It was not the lower-middle-class poverty of the depression years that taught her caution but the alternating rebuff and encouragement, the constant ambivalence of affection and resentment that she received from these, her only kin. Her uncle's increasing poverty mattered not at all, his wife's animosity a great deal. She was shy, yet not stiffly so because she was eager for life and had been thrown out on her own resources so early that she had acquired a certain poise and maturity.

A wartime marriage had brought her complete if transitory happiness and a sense of belonging wholly to someone at last. That it had lasted a brief three months before her Air Corps husband was shipped out to China only served to increase her conviction that things fair upon the surface were dark beneath.

Now, at a sharp look from her commanding officer standing at the head of the group, she flushed and quickly replaced her heavy steel helmet, only to be maddened anew by the drag of its weight against the muscles of her neck. It seemed hours since they had been called up onto this crowded deck with barely enough time to swallow a hasty breakfast of strong

coffee and soggy pancakes. Yet here they were still, without room to sit much less to rest their heavy packs.

"Jesus, Lee, but I'm sick of this hurry-up-and-wait business!" one of her companions hissed in her ear and she nodded, sighing. After a year in the army I should be used to it, she thought. I should be used to anything, even you, my lad, and she smiled gravely as the curious eyes that had been watching her touched her own and slid away in confusion while a hot flush reddened the round cheeks of the young soldier across the deck.

Oh no harm done! she mutely told him, reflecting that he was very young, younger than herself. There he stands, poor kid, and there's no telling what will happen to him before this day or week or month or year is gone. . . .

Overhead the loudspeakers splintered her thoughts:

"Major Collier! Major Collier! Assemble your unit at your proper station and prepare to disembark. Assemble your unit. . . ."

The girl started nervously; a hand closed over her arm and her chief nurse's broad Irish face bent down to hers. "Come on, kid, this is it!" the older woman cried harshly even as someone ahead barked an order and the mass surged toward the rail.

Lee nodded, chewing her lower lip. Her heart began to pound, her legs turned hollow with panic and excitement as the faraway rumble of artillery on the misty rim of land took on a now ominous significance. With the others she moved toward the rail while soldiers on all sides jostled and shoved to make room for their passage.

"First Platoon, X Field Hospital, debark!"

The hoarse cry came from directly overhead and the young nurse's heart gave a painful lurch. She was pushed forward as the man before her began to climb awkwardly over the ship's rail, snagging his pack against the iron pipe as he bent to gain a hold on the huge landing nets strung over the side.

For a second she was poised by the rail looking down past his head at the water which seemed very rough and very far below. Then she was scrambling over the side, musette bag shifting clumsily on her back and her helmet slipping forward, blinding her. Somehow, she got a firm grip on the thick ropes of the net and lowered herself quickly as her comrades came crowding after her, their heavy shoes just missing her fingers as they too swung out on the net. Scrambling frantically for foot and handholds, her pack and helmet shifting wildly, she

inched her way down, craning her neck to see through sweat and spray.

Just below, the landing craft bobbed drunkenly, rising now until it seemed only a few feet away then sinking suddenly and all but passing from her strained line of vision. Half a dozen hands reached toward her, a voice shouted as the craft rose again . . . "Wait! Wait! Now!" Blindly she stepped off into space, felt the hands catch at her and draw her down even as the boat sagged away.

"Catch me! Oh!" a woman's voice screamed in panic.

"Easy. . . . Now!"

"Oh Jesus. . . . Oh my God . . . I almost fell . . . I slipped, I almost fell!"

Lee was aware of June Harley whimpering beside her. Thin-faced and very dark, Lieutenant Harley stumbled against the younger girl, panting into her face with fear, her smear of lipstick like a wound across her ashen face. "Jesus . . . oh Jesus . . ." Her narrow hands shook badly as she raised them to straighten her helmet and Lee was taken aback at the panic in the other's dark eyes.

"It's okay!" she cried inanely, steadying June against the sudden sag of the craft.

"Great God!" Effie Newcomer, the platoon's chief nurse, lurched into the boat beside them, her helmet hanging over one ear, her broad face flushed with exertion. She grabbed the slanting gunwale with one hand while she wiped her streaming cheeks with the sleeve of her fatigues. Big in bulk but short in height, red-faced, with graying hair and faded blue eyes she presented the typical idealized picture of an aging Irish washerwoman. She cursed now fluently and with obvious pleasure and, between every other obscenity, shouted advice and encouragement to those of the platoon who were still negotiating the drop from net to landing craft.

"Let go that goddam rope!" she shouted, cupping her hands against the wind and the loud wet smack of the waves.

Confused by the noise, the constant rolling and lurching of the boat and jammed against the burly body of her chief, Lee Caine never knew when the last man dropped down and the landing craft cast off from the transport's scabby side. The Channel was choppy and sent the small craft seesawing in wild erratic lurches. Spray splashed viciously back from the square ungraceful bow to drench the soldiers crouched along the sides.

In a daze, hardly noting the paling faces around her, or

the man who leaned abruptly out to vomit into the sea, she sheltered herself as best she could from the chill cut of the spray. The red-edged clouds piling northward before the wind were the extent of her view and, watching them, she received the impression of tremendous speed. Either she or they were rushing headlong. Remote and high, pushed helplessly before the wind even as she was being swept blindly toward the future, the clouds gave wings to her fancy, her mood of bewilderment faded and she dreamed away from this incomprehensible moment. Within this brief illusion of freedom she felt the wildness, the exhilaration of the running sea and the wind. She forgot foreboding, panic, the distress of fatigue as she raised her face to the spray and her blood began to sing. In a state of euphoria she stared up at the piling clouds.

This was the great adventure. She'd arrived at last on the edge of it and, looking forward, she saw it as something dangerous and something to fear. Just as plainly she also saw it as a great brave thing, a part of history and, more especially, of her own generation.

There was a harsh grating beneath her feet, a violent lurch that sent her headlong into the man in front and then the landing craft had come to a halt, its nose dug well into a sand bank twenty feet from shore.

"Let the women off first! Damn it, hold up there!" a voice bellowed over Lee's head, and disentangling themselves from one another the five nurses crawled over the gunwale to drop into frigid knee-deep water. Exhausted by nausea and dizzy from the wild pitching of the craft, they struggled to the water's edge and up through the damp tidewater sands. Here they were confronted by an unearthly sight. The beach was spread in an awesome panorama of stacks of equipment and hurrying troops; hundreds of vehicles rumbled and clanked up from the sea to form snakelike lines converging at the dunes. The dull thunder of countless engines mingled with the distant rumble of artillery and constant wash of waves, and all thought was paralyzed, all perception but that of sight suffocated before the utter madness of the scene.

Panting, Lee struggled after the others. Sweat poured down her cheeks, plastering the short hair against her forehead. The musette bag, humped in an ungainly burden on her shoulders, bent her body awkwardly forward as she walked. Incredulously, she gazed at the terrible litter around her, the crazy flotsam of war spewed over the sands as if by a gigantic insane

tide: hand grenades half-buried, brown and waxy shreds of K-ration boxes covered with seaweed or smeared with blood, a helmet knocked askew with a mute and jagged tear across the crown, a rifle lying beside a dune, a messkit torn to shiny metal fragments, pistol belts and pack-straps tangled in the piles of lumpish life preservers, one worn army shoe with laces dragging in the sand. All of these were small things that spoke of men now dead, of men fallen among the craters yawning across the smooth curving surface of the beach or sprawled along the water's edge, caught in the tangle of traps and wrecked equipment and washed by the waves which granted them a small semblance of life in death with the even rise and fall of the sea.

The massive untidy jumble stretched as far as the eye could see, up and down the long curve of shore, while in the shallow water, emerging shadow-like from the still misty light of the dawn, rose an endless chain of barriers and traps stuck upright and rusted in the surf. Entangled grotesquely in their crossed beams was a great deal more of the indescribable debris of Invasion Day: wrecked landing craft and sea-going tanks, soggy life preservers, overturned trucks and jeeps, a great watery junkyard of metal and cloth and wood mingled and smashed by violence.

"Take a break!"

A red-faced MP captain standing on top of a dune shouted down to them, motioning wildly with his hands to bring their straggling column to a halt. Relieved, they dropped to the sand, easing the straps of their packs and gear. One man removed his helmet only to clap it back on his head at the bark of a nearby MP, "Keep that helmet on, soldier. There's a goddam war on!"

Nobody even smiled. In England they would have laughed.

The five nurses, as though by common and unspoken agreement, huddled a little apart from the men of the unit.

"Whew! I couldn't have walked another step!" Sally Hawks panted, slapping her pockets for cigarettes. Her pleasant face was a mask of dirt with two sweat channels curving oddly down her plump cheeks, giving her a grimly satiric look as alien to her soft easygoing blondness as the heavy fatigues were to her large body.

"Now what happens?" Paula Avers asked. She was a pretty dark-eyed girl in her middle twenties. Her voice was soft but flat with the slightly unpleasant twang of a Midwest accent. In

defiance of regulations she wore her brown hair long, the thick curling ends falling well over the collar of her uniform.

In answer to her question, Captain Newcomer pointed toward the water where a huge LCT wallowed. Even as they watched, its ramp came down giving it the look of an open-mouthed hippopotamus rolling in the Channel swell. An ambulance began to grope its way down the ramp followed by another, and behind it three loaded trucks with red crosses painted on their covering tarps. One lurched heavily and a corpsman shouted in mock alarm, "Hey, my duffle bag!"

A curt voice, cutting through the din, addressed the nurses. "Effie, you take the second truck."

Major Edward Collier was standing before them, feet widely planted, his fists on his hips, his lean, dark face grim. It was a characteristic pose, halfway between belligerence and the ease of command that seemed natural to him, medical man though he was. Tall and thin, he was wholly impressive although sometimes Lee Caine thought she caught a hint of unease under the exaggeration of this stance as though he feared himself out of character, even possibly a little ridiculous.

Now, as he ordered brusquely, "Load at once. This damn beach is no place to loiter!" she noticed that he shifted his feet and let his hands fall from his hips, though no hint of a smile touched the corners of his finely moulded, rather full mouth.

As if to second him, the MP captain came running down from his dune. "Better load and get the hell out of here, Major!" he shouted, gesturing toward the trucks crawling up from the water's edge. To emphasize his words he tipped back his head and scanned the sky. His face was anxious, there was no courtesy in his voice as his eyes slid past the nurses and he repeated, "Get the hell out of here, fast!" He was too intent on his job, on operating his small niche in the vast confusion of the beach, and in worrying about when the German bombers would return, to register the fact that these were the first women to come past his post.

With a final backward spurt of sand the small medical convoy drew up, and silently and with effort the fifty men and women of the platoon climbed into the loaded trucks.

"Glory be to God, we're off!" the chief nurse bellowed hoarsely as she squeezed her bulk on to one of the benches extending along the sides of the big six-wheeled trucks. The MP captain waved them on with a relieved look and eagerly turned his attention to a new unit which was struggling up the

sands. The wheels spun, gained traction, and slowly the trucks moved forward, following the loaded ambulances into the line of vehicles that converged at the dunes to pass beneath the arms of a shattered windmill. Dust wreathed them as they gained the narrow road leading inland.

CHAPTER 2

The trucks rumbled on. The early morning mists cloaking the fields lifted slowly with the passing hour and the sun grew brighter, hotter. In its unrelieved glare the shattered walls and sightless windows of ruined villages and farms cast stark shadows across the hospital convoy's route. Shell-pocked walls gave way to hedges powdered with dust in which wan flowers bloomed and then, once more, came the broken walls of another town. Dead cattle, like outcroppings of glacial rock, were strewn about the fields.

The convoy paused at a crossroads and Lee stared over the tailgate of her truck in stunned fascination at the swollen carcasses of a team of horses stricken in harness and lying one on top of the other in the ditch. The slack traces were tangled about their rigid legs while the pole of the overturned heavy cart was shoved upward across their backs. A great cloud of green-blue flies rose and settled on the putrid bodies, and soon, she knew, thousands of maggots would strip them to their essential bones.

She shuddered, aware of the sweetish sickening odor that rose sluggishly with the dust and heat. She turned her eyes away and held her breath against that stink, heavy and cloying like an evil hand across her face.

Resolutely, she gazed at the village in which they were halted, wondering how it had managed to escape the scythe of destruction that had leveled the rest of the countryside through which they had passed. Except for one gaping break in the roadside wall where a tank had evidently punched its way, the town was intact. Nearly every house had a thatched roof, and before each door, manure piles, dark brown and rich, steamed slightly. A small fountain in the cobbled square flowed into a trough on a clear cool note of pleasure that tickled dry throats.

Someone in the waiting trucks hawked dust from his mouth and spat.

Determinedly, the girl kept her eyes away from the swollen horses though her first dread had turned to a rather horrifying desire to look again. Was it gas that made them so monstrous? With an effort she forced her attention back to the village. It must be medieval surely. The barnyards and alleyways were cluttered with the filth of years; the scabrous walls, many feet thick, leaned grotesquely with the weight of centuries; the thresholds were worn to half-moons of stone, while the absolute stillness of the narrow streets lent credence to the sensation of stepping backward into antiquity.

It's so old, she thought, bemused by the quiet and the calm. In England she had never ceased being impressed by the timelessness of the towns, their atmosphere of long endurance. She had found the contrast between these and the stark small western towns of her own background not only overwhelming but immensely pleasant, like the peace and content one feels in the possession of old heirlooms that carry on a story and an essence of past life. She noted the effect of crumbling walls, of mellow stone and gnarled thick trees with grave appreciative eyes and the wish that she had had more than two years at the university, for the half-remembered lectures on Romanesque and Gothic architecture returned to tease her while history remained a vague mass of medieval detail and a confusion of the lives and deaths of kings. Yet, she thought, a little regretfully, maybe it was all just as well. There isn't time for tourists. . . .

"What's the damned hold up?" A man by the truck cab moved wearily, wiping at his face with the back of a filthy hand.

"Damn hot!" someone echoed on a deep yawn, while within the cab, itself, the driver pressed and released, pressed and released his accelerator in a restless whine.

Lee removed her helmet and ran her fingers through her hair, feeling with intense disgust the sweat and dirt clogged on her scalp, the crust of dirt covering her cheeks, caked in the corners of her mouth and eyes and stiff against the neck of her fatigues. She felt filthy, bedraggled, and so tired that it seemed impossible to sit upright on the hard plank seat for one moment more.

"Hey, kid, have some candy?"

Effie Newcomer leaned forward, proffering the melted remains of a chocolate bar. "They may be Limey," she gestured with triumph, "but they're better'n nothing!" and thrust the

goo into the younger nurse's unenthusiastic hand. Straightening, she fumbled again in the pockets of her baggy fatigue pants to produce another sticky bar.

"Here you are, Tim, lad. Don't be so goddam polite! Got a whole gas mask filled with 'em!"

Captain Mason reared back in horror. "Hell, Eff, give it to . . . to Sal there." With a desperate look on his broad and equally Irish face he tried his best to duck the gift.

"No? Then how about you, Paula?"

"No thanks."

"But my God, Eff . . . I . . . " Overwhelmed, he gingerly accepted the mess and under her vigilant eye even attempted a cautious bite. "Jesus Christ!" he muttered plaintively and Lee, hearing him, grinned.

There was a sudden screech of metal on stone and the roar of heavy engines behind them. A column of tanks swept past, sunlight gleaming dully from their greenish flanks. Turret men stood upright with arms braced against the open cockpit rims as dust whipped up around them and over the standing convoy. Fascinated Lee watched them pass, awed by the thunder and roar, the leashed power of tons of steel and the thrusting guns. The short hairs at the back of her neck tingled with excitement and she felt an immense desire to shout into the racket of engines and clanking treads. It was the same wondering excitement she had often felt watching the big bombers rise one after another from the airfield near their hospital quarters in England.

As abruptly as they had appeared, the tanks were gone; the roar of their passing died away gradually as the dust clouds, trailing for a mile behind the last of their column, settled to the road again. Idling engines strengthened, the medical convoy moved slowly into the thickening traffic and they were on their way once more. Jeeps scuttled back and forth swinging past the slower vehicles with a roar of open throttles. Motorcycles fled by swathed in dust and importance. Priority convoys of ammunition forced the Platoon into long waits in the ditches. Red-eyed, hoarse, powdered from head to foot with dust, they sat in stupefied silence, too miserable to move or speak. Yet even above the rumble of passing trucks they could hear the distant booming of artillery among the hills to the south. At first it sounded intermittent, indecisive as though hesitating in momentary timidity of its own potential power, then the suspense was shattered within seconds as the rumble swelled to

a dull rattling roar that spread along the horizon and seemed to shiver with the heat waves over their heads. Infantrymen, walking route step and in single file on either side of the road, raised their heads to listen, their faces immobile.

"Are those guns?" June Harley croaked, two furrows of anxiety dividing her narrow brows.

"Bless us, you silly fool, it's not the braying of asses!" Effie Newcomer boomed, her pale eyes sliding from one to the other of her charges. Her own face was unworried and calm for she was an old hand. She and Tim Mason, the Shock Ward doctor, and Major Collier and a few of the corpsmen were the old-timers of the unit, the only ones who had come all the way with the X Field Hospital from the day it landed in Africa near Oran, through Sicily and now, France.

On infrequent occasions she spoke of those days, of the huge backlogs of wounded piled outside their meager surgery, of the types of cases they had had—the chest and belly wounds, the head and multiple body and severed femoral arteries that as often as not died in a gush of blood upon the operating table. She spoke with pride of the crude methods they had sometimes been forced to use, the improvisations rigged up in the field to meet emergencies never printed in the manual. Her eyes would grow misty and her mellow voice turn rough as the names of battles rolled from her tongue; she would speak of the joes of this regiment or that, this division and that company as if she, too, had fought her way through those now famous bloody towns, battered hills, and charnelhouse passes.

In a sense she had, insofar as anyone so endowed with a strong natural pity for all things hurt can live through the bad moments of others. Life had been hard for Effie Newcomer in any case; she had never known ease. Born of a large Catholic family, work had come to her even before her bones had hardened and she had been working ever since. To her life was difficult, and pain a constant companion, for the mundane afflictions of fallen arches and varicose veins faithfully remained. Marriage and children of her own had somehow escaped her, leaving a great void which she could only partially fill by lavishing her unspent maternal compassion upon the sufferings of others. In a sense she had found her natural element in nursing, and more especially in the war. In all senses of the phrase, she was the *old-timer!*

Often, she and Tim Mason would burst into violent argument about those past days in Africa, their good-natured faces

would flush hotly, their voices roughen and meet edge to edge.

"Aw hell, Eff, that wasn't the way of it! By God, the British made a sweep from the south . . . here . . . and our Big Red One jumped off. . . ."

"Look here, Tim Mason, I was there same as yourself! By Christ, I say the British damn well weren't there, and what's more they never intended to be! Look here, can't that thick Irish head of yours keep a whittle of a damn thing inside? This is the way it was. . . ."

The portly Mason, looking like a jolly priest, would bow his head and assume an air of exaggerated patience with a wink or two for the bystander, but within the moment he would be back into the fray with flashing eyes and insistent voice, beating at the air with his big hands as though to physically crush his opponent. It sometimes went on like this for hours until only the two of them were left fighting old wars. They were, of course, the best of friends.

As the truck rolled on, one of the men muttered, "Wonder how far those are?" jerking his head in the direction of the rumble of guns.

"Hell, at least twenty miles!" the chief nurse snorted and the corpsman turned to stare, disbelief written large across his sweaty face.

"Are they *kraut,* Captain Newcomer?" someone else asked respectfully.

Lee grinned. Already, she thought, we're aping the language, the war-weary fashion of 'Bud, you ain't seen anything yet!' *Krauts,* you said, indicating that you came from the lines. All the way back to England they said *kraut* in tough weary voices hoping that somebody, anybody, even a limey, would take them for the young-who-were-about-to-die.

But her smile faded and the thought was gone as she watched the infantrymen walking on either side of the road. A few looked up, catching her eye and flashing startled grins at the sight of a woman. A few raised their hands in mock salute, tipping their helmets ironically, laughing and pointing toward the sound of guns, then back at the red crosses of the ambulances with a shrug of their laden shoulders as if to say, 'You may see us soon again!' For the most part though they plodded on, weary, tense, overburdened and unheeding, never lifting their eyes from the road or from the back of the man marching ahead. Dust lay thickly on their fatigues, dust puffed out beneath their shoes with each forward step, billowed and swelled

belied the ideal and made empty heroic vision, she forgot that death was too often agony, oblivion and decay. And her forgetting was no more strange than the forgetfulness of all men who, before unfurling flags and cadenced march of boots, the scream of bugles and thud of drums, no longer care that war is only death and obscenity, and who, in the general cry of panic and of hate, of patriotism and of greed, begrudge the time it might take to reckon up the cost. She forgot now. She would remember later and for all time.

The hours of morning crawled away as the small hospital convoy moved slowly down the narrow winding road inland. There were many pauses in the dust and many lurching starts. In disbelief and wonder the girl watched the countryside unfold, the fantastic panorama of a twice-invaded land. They passed fields posted forebodingly with black-skulled signs lettered "ACHTUNG MINEN" and pastures criss-crossed with rusting barbed wire hung with triangular yellow pennants which also bore the death's-head. They passed sloping orchards where black and white cattle grazed and where white apple blossoms still perfumed the air. They passed smashed and burned vehicles and guns of all descriptions, German and American alike, tanks and personnel carriers and field pieces hastily shoved clear of the road, overturned blackened metal shells that under the hot sun stank strongly of burned flesh. They went through ruined towns whose empty gaping buildings loomed ominously over the trucks and whose streets smelled of cellar-dank mingled with the stench of decomposing flesh; hollow towns that were filled with the echo of their passing, where broken walls leaned wearily agape and empty windows framed the cleanness of the blue spring sky.

She noticed that the farmers who followed their vast horses across the newly turned fields only occasionally paused to watch the convoy, that only a few people of the shattered towns stood among the rubble of their streets to watch their passing. Infrequently, an old woman would raise a thin arm in greeting, an old man grin and toss knobby fly-specked apples into the open trucks. But the children always came shrieking, running after them through the dust.

By and large, the people stood dully beside their battered homes, their dead cattle, and raised their eyes but briefly to the roar of passing motors. For liberation had had its price; freedom was walking hand in hand with death and both had come to Normandy this June of 1944.

behind the passing trucks to wreath them in a perpetual choking cloud.

What are they thinking? Lee wondered as she looked down into the shadowed faces. What must they feel now within the sound of guns? Is this one, with helmet cocked like a rakish hat and teeth so white, afraid? And the one with head bowed staring vacantly: was he afraid of death? Did they even think of death? He who grinned up at her now and he, three paces back, who walked exactly as the one ahead? A pang of compassion, swift as light and fleeting, squeezed her heart and caught her breath. There was something obscene about these shuffling columns moving so slowly, so inexorably forward. There was something corrupt about the gray look, the weighted plodding despair of these men that too closely resembled the sad-eyed lines of cattle moving up the ramps of a shabby slaughterhouse to their death.

Death, she thought. There was always death. Sometimes, in the hospital where she had trained, the old had fought death with an unreasoning panic, had clutched convulsively at a hand, a sheet, masks or dressings or oxygen tent with a strength that shocked; they gasped each late breath and held it as dearly as though it represented all of life's long labor. Often the interne would wink at her over such a deathbed, would grin and pitch his voice to genial callousness, "Come on, old one, it's time to move on and make room for somebody else!"

The worst of all, though, were the children. There was one she could not forget: wan, big-eyed, thin face lined with fever, small body fouled by death's approach, the child had cried over and over for its mother as though seeking the only real safety on earth, on and on in the quiet room while the mother cowered, helpless and torn, clutching with hands that could no more hold life than they could water. Oh yes, there was always death, Lee thought. It came to the old, to the young, to these and someday, at some selected moment, to herself as well.

A young captain walking at the head of his company smiled and tipped his helmet to her with infinite grace, sending a shiver through her body and a forlorn feeling tinged with a nameless excitement. The image of the driven beasts faded and was replaced by the oldest of poetic pictures, the ancient, mystic, glorious concept of the young who die as heroes, gay in the face of death, of the young who are garnered by the Valkyries and who never wither, never age, never know defeat. She forgot that the dust choked them, she forgot that their obvious misery

CHAPTER 3

One by one the trucks spread out across the sloping orchard, each jolting to a halt in a semicamouflaged position beneath an ancient apple tree. The engines were switched off and quiet settled like a cloak over the hunched figures in the dusty open trucks. Motionless, dazed, engulfed by silence, the platoon sat stunned. The sudden cessation of grinding gears and rumble of heavy engines, the end to the interminable bouncing and bumping was far too much to accept immediately.

During the few minutes that she sat there, flaccid with fatigue, Lee became aware of the small sounds of the summer day: the bird song from a nearby tree mingled with the light tinkle of cooling engines, a muffled voice that carried indistinctly from a farmhouse below, and somewhere, quite distant, the rattle and thud of artillery that died in the far-off whisper of exploding shells. A long shallow valley stretched away from the orchard slope to a ridge of hills, whose sharp spine was outlined by an evenly planted row of slender poplar trees. It was from beyond this lightly bending line that the rattle of guns awoke and died and woke again. Peacefully, the sun caught the distant leaves in a shiver of light while below, a thick yellow cloud of dust boiled up over the fields as a tank convoy bored across the valley floor.

Finally, a man moved and cursed in the truck behind; the spell was broken and as one, everybody rose stiffly to climb awkwardly over the tailgates. Their feet sank in the soft grass as they hit the ground and painfully lugged their packs and gear away from the trucks. Voices rose, men called back and forth, commands were given loudly and everyone was suddenly gay with the relief of solid unmoving ground; the cool wind-touched hill, and the shadowed grass beckoned beneath the twisted trees.

The five nurses moved up the hill to settle themselves happily under a wide-shading old tree. They hastened to help each other out of cumbersome gear and with wild abandon discarded

musette bags and gas masks, web belts, helmets, even leggings and shoes.

"Holy Mother, but that feels good!"

A panting soldier set down a precious jerry can of water by the tree. "The major says go easy on that, Capt'n. He says this is all there is."

"God bless you, Jimmy my lad! Easy does it." And with cries of pleasure they yanked the steel shells of their helmets free of the liners, filled them to the brim with the tepid water, and scrubbed at their reddened hands and sun-raw faces until the dust ran off in muddy rivulets.

"Will you look at that dirt!" June Harley cried in disgust as she tossed her water away. "I've never been so filthy in my life!"

Washed, cooled, her thirst of the morning slaked, Lee sat with her back against the rough bark of the tree. The wind blowing across the orchard was wonderfully cool and smelled of old blossoms now fallen and scattered among the trees. She could feel the sun sifting down through the leaves above her head, warm fingers of light moving over her hair while the beads of perspiration gathered on her forehead dried at the wind's touch. Drowsily, she watched the poppies flicker with the motion of sunlit grass in the valley below. They were like so many drops of blood, brilliant new blood, still fresh, still warm. . . .

That's a damned silly thing to think! She brought herself up short, startled by her morbidity and slid further down in the thick grass watching the shining unmarred plain of gold undulate evenly before the wind. She plucked a blade of grass and chewed contentedly on the stem. For this I'll get lumpy jaw and be hideous the rest of my life. They say that there's lots of that over here. She removed the blade and eyed it. Should I? Shouldn't I? Ah, this country is full of bugs! And she threw it away, thereby acknowledging both her vanity and the anxieties born of her medical training.

"What do you hear from that husband of yours?"

Startled, she raised her head to find Major Collier standing before her.

"What were you doing, dreaming?" he demanded derisively as he lowered himself with a grunt to the grass beside her. "Well, and what do you hear?"

"Not very much," she replied lightly. "He's busy, you know."

"Ah, so he must be." Collier nodded and mocked her with

a grin. His eyes were strained and tired and incongruously gentle in the bitter intensity of his thin dark face. In spite of his English name, Edward Collier was very Jewish, very acute and observant, yet aloof and withdrawn, caustic with a sarcasm that bordered on the cruel. This, Lee felt obscurely, served to mask the morbid sensitivity that seemed to underlie all that he said and did.

She admired him immensely; in a shy, half-frightened way she liked him, yet he could terrify her with his amused brutal smiles and cutting words. Just before the platoon had left England he had chosen her as his assistant for his surgical team. While his choice had made her proud, for she was the newcomer and youngster of the platoon and he was already famous as a topnotch surgeon, it had also brought her dismay. His reputation as an exacting and relentless taskmaster was enough to frighten a nurse with many more years experience in surgery.

"He does write? Now and then?"

"Of course," she murmured, annoyed to feel the warm blood rise to her cheeks. How she hated to seem the silly schoolgirl with this man, and how easily and often he could make her feel just that!

He laughed and stuck a battered cigarette between his lips. "Love," he said softly. "Great stuff, eh?" and bent his dark head to a lighted match. His mind moved in quick clicks down an erratic track even as he spoke. I mustn't forget to leave orders for the whole blood pickup at the depot. The man, O'Daniel, has a dose, damn him! My stomach feels like the dysentery coming on. Jesus, that again! His eyes touched his companion's face. My God, how young she is! he thought as his lips bantered, but his concerns were too many and too diffuse for him to focus long. The nerves of his lean body were taut with expectation and drawn thin by his own lonely sense of responsibility. Almost in desperation, his mind leapt ahead, then back, checking off things already attended to, mentally noting things still undone; planning, hoping, remembering with a nervous start something all but forgotten in the press of events. A man ought to be made of wire, flexible wire, he thought wearily as he drew on his cigarette. The taste of it was acrid in his dry mouth, but it soothed him.

"Not much time for that sort of thing now. Is he handsome, this husband of yours?" he asked idly, his eyes returning to her face. He was startled to see the color rise again beneath her clear skin. Young? Why, she's a child!

She moved restlessly under his gaze. Why can't I remember? she thought uneasily, frightened that it was so difficult to recall the face, the voice, the smile that had so abruptly ended her ingrown loneliness. She could think of Bob with the familiar wrench of pain and longing, but she could not see or remember him clearly over the year of separation, and this disturbed her deeply. It seemed so incomprehensible that what had once been so alive, so much a part of her every thought and deed, now slumbered beneath the surface and would not be stirred by all her yearning. But I loved . . . love him, she thought in desperation.

"What I want to know is when the hell we're going to have chow, Ed?" Effie Newcomer rumbled suddenly and rolled over on her back to cock a jaundiced eye at the sun. "It must be damn near three o'clock and my poor guts are tied in knots!" She patted her enormous stomach tenderly.

"My advice to you is forget your stomach and concentrate on a little sleep instead," Collier replied. "You had a K-ration, didn't you? What more do you want?"

"Steak, french fries, apple pie a la mode," Effie replied promptly.

He laughed. "Dream it up, old girl. Meanwhile, I'll promise to feed you . . . something . . . before we move on to relieve the Clearing Company tonight. I still say you'd better get some sleep though. Same to you, kid. We work all night, half the day, maybe all night again, who can say? I hear the situation is a mess. Not enough hospitals, men going back on LST's when they ought to be having surgery first, and so on . . ."

"That doesn't sound like anything new," Effie murmured, closing her eyes.

"No," he agreed, "It's not new." He smoked a moment more in silence, thinking: No, it isn't new. I've been through all this before, of course. Yet never before had he been poised on the edge of crisis and felt such dread. Life was a series of minor and major crises, yes. A man got into medical school by burning the midnight oil and then he turned around to work like hell to get out again, and all along the line there was one damn nerve-shaking event after another. A man married, the decision and its consequences looming large across his back like a huge peddler's pack taken up for life. He sighed. I lived through all this, he thought wryly, and one year of this crazy war. I suppose I can come back to abnormality and survive another year.

He ground out his cigarette with impatient fingers and

abruptly rose. "Sleep, kid. It's a damn sight more important than eating, even dreaming," and he strode off down the hill leaving her with warm cheeks again.

Yawning, she too lay back and let the drowsy weight of the afternoon wash over her. The sun slid slowly among the bright poppies nodding in the neat square fields of green and gold, a waiting silence settled in a haze of heat that was broken infrequently by the growl of a single gun or the muffled roar of an explosion in the distance. Her tired eyes closed easily, her confused thoughts drifted and with profound contentment she felt the coarse weave of the musette bag beneath her cheek and the warm sun, through the leaves, fell lightly on her hair.

When she woke several hours later the day was gone. The sun touched the hill only lightly now and with lushness, a subdued tropical splendor that wove a fantasy of cool green and gold patches beneath the trees. Panic seized her. She sat bolt upright, afraid to find herself alone! No! They hadn't gone. She hadn't been left behind. Relieved, she lay back and relapsed to drowsy semi-sleep. Far away, the clanking of tanks marred the quiet as evening settled over the valley. The lengthening rays of the sun shimmered like silver edging along the row of poplars, and in the deep grass of the orchard a few crickets sang and flies buzzed dreamily.

"Hey, kid, I was beginning to wonder if you were ever coming to!"

Lee turned her head to find Sally Hawks sitting a few feet away, smoking, grinning down at her. Sally stretched her big handsome body indolently.

"What's happened? I thought we weren't staying very long."

"I don't know. I heard the major yelling SNAFU so I guess it's the same old thing: hurry up and wait."

Lee's spirits sank. So near and yet so far, she thought in disgust. It seemed as if they'd been struggling for months now to reach this vague place where they could be of some use, earn their rations, as Collier kept saying. She tried to fight off the inertia of disappointment but the rapid alterations from tension to boredom were having their usual effect. She sat up to gaze indifferently now over the valley.

"We're going to get coffee anyhow," Sally offered after a moment.

Lee nodded without enthusiasm and watched the silver edging die away from the poplars. She wasn't curious any longer about what lay beyond that long line of hills.

"Say, ladies," Effie Newcomer lumbered up in the dusk. "Ed says last call for restroom service and the like. He says load up your gear, come on down and get a cup of coffee and a K-ration to eat on the move. You hear me, Paula? June? Okay, let's try the country john . . ." and she started off in the general direction of a hedgerow.

"Don't step on a mine, Effie! Don't *sit* on one, I mean!" Sally called after her and giggled at her own coarse humor.

"Sal, could you straighten this damned strap?" Lee had risen and was listlessly shrugging into her gear.

"Sure, honey, sure. Here, your canteen is caught. There, that oughta do it. Come'n, let's get that coffee before the stampede."

As they started down through the twilit orchard, sudden sheets of light flashed beyond the now dark hills and almost instantly a low deep rumble rolled against their slope.

"My God!"

"What is it?"

"Artillery, I guess. . . ."

"Jesus, I sure wish this damned war was over. Look at that!"

At the northern end of the valley, red tracers burst from the dark curve of earth to dash in bright arcs across the early night. Swift stabs of light sprayed over the sky and somewhere, close by, big guns opened up with a tremendous belching roar. Waves of compressed air beat against the eardrums of the startled watchers in the orchard and over their heads the leaves shivered and danced as if in a rising wind. The whole night split apart as tons of steel ripped from the valley, hurtled over the far ridge and exploded somewhere in the distance. Beyond the line of slender bending trees, other guns bayed into the descending darkness and mines erupted.

Out there, Lee thought, men crawl on their bellies to attack and, on their bellies, die. She shivered, remembering the long columns walking in the dust with filthy, drawn, young faces and bodies hunched wearily beneath their heavy packs. Even now they were out there beyond those hills, out there on the edge of night and even now, perhaps, a few were dead.

When the nurses joined them at the field stove most of the men were already in line waiting for coffee. Their quiet voices reflected the reassurance they felt in the small security of the group.

A voice barked sharply, "Ten minutes, Sergeant Nelson!"

Lee touched the scalding canteen cup to her lips, wide awake now, her sullenness evaporated.

"Effie."

People were dark blurred forms moving in the dusk, detaching themselves from the darker shadows of the trees.

"Effie, you nurses load in the second ambulance this time," Major Collier said, his voice curt, almost eager.

Does he like this? Lee wondered. Is he excited too after all he's seen? She listened as his voice moved off among the shadows, brisk, commanding, to be abruptly lost among other voices bobbing along the dark hillside and snatched in the rush of night wind or drowned by a sudden whump of artillery.

"All right, drink up, kids, and let's load!"

Awkwardly stumbling among the trees, they made their way down hill. Something vague and white loomed out of darkness and putting out her hand, Lee touched the metal side of an ambulance.

"Hey, you there. Delaney? Is this us?"

"Yes'm, Captain Newcomer. This here's your ambulance. I'll get the door . . ." He surged past Lee and yanked open the doors at the back. . . .The step clanged down into place.

Sheltering what was left of her coffee and clutching the greasy K-ration box beneath her arm, Lee climbed in after the others.

"Christ, watch those duffle bags in the middle!"

The aisle between the two bench-like seats that ran along either side of the cabin was filled with gear. Knowing by experience that a duffle bag would prove a softer seat than the benches, Lee settled herself on one near the door. Leaning back against the metal wall she sipped at the remainder of her coffee, bemused by the warm darkness of the night and the muffled sounds beyond the ambulance. The others, too, were silent, each wrapped in the secrecy of thought, their separate identities submerged again in dumb and submissive waiting. Voices shouted on the hill and nearby someone cursed, "Hey, Reb, where's the damn truck?"

Suddenly, an engine rumbled to life, followed by another, then a third. The ambulance starter ground, the motor coughed, sputtered, caught, and the driver let it idle as he left his seat. A hand hit the ambulance side and Major Collier's voice cried hoarsely at the open door.

"All set, Effie?"

"Yes, sir, all present and accounted for," she answered form-

ally though she could see little more than a white blur hovering against the dark backdrop of the night.

"All right, close up, Delaney. Use nothing except your blackout lights and, if necessary, your blue flashlight. Understand? They say St. Marie is full of snipers and . . ." The clang of the folding step and the shutting door cut off his voice. The cabin was filled with the murmur of the engine, and then the driver was back, sliding behind the wheel. He jammed the ambulance into gear. It lurched forward to join the dark moving shadow of the lead ambulance already starting down the rutted track toward the road.

Lee tossed the dregs of her coffee out the open window and fumbled about to pack the cup away with her canteen, then leaned her head against the frame, feeling the pleasant breeze. She was aware of the others behind her sitting or half lying on the benches, their feet propped among the bags as wordless and absorbed they swayed to the jolting of the ambulance. She wondered what they thought of all this; how she would remember it. I suppose it won't ever be very clear, she mused. It's too disassociated from everything I've ever known. She tried to imagine herself looking backward to this time and saw only the moving ambulance floating between shadowy trees and the black road toward some unknown, unnamed thing ahead. Like a poor foolish virgin, she thought with a smile, like a sadly innocent virgin on the first night, with her passion still the romance of moonlight and wine and silvered water and her knowledge only instinct, and as erring as instinct can be. She propped her chin in cupped hands, resting her elbows on her knees and wondered why she felt both sad and happy.

Dreamily, she watched the trucks come crunching and booming behind, moving shadows that drew light clouds of dust, trailing them eerily against the black wall of the hedgerows, strange spiraling light nebulae that seemed wraiths of ghostly columns moving forward in the ditches. Over the dark curve of the hills flashes of artillery played across the sky like summer lightning and the faint thunder and rattle was audible above the noise of the motor, the whirring soothing tires.

She wondered briefly if she would die out here somewhere during the war, but the thought seemed absurd even though everything she'd seen so far spoke of mass death. For others, she thought, not for me. Her body was too alive, the wind too cool, the brush of leaves against the sky too lovely. More than that, there was everything waiting to begin again after this was

over; her new life, so sweet that the thought of it and of her husband, vague as both might seem, sent longing through her blood like a flame and she shivered, not from cold.

The others were quiet too. Now and again someone would reach for a canteen and the liquid gurgle of water would whisper a second in the droning cabin. Or someone would quietly ask a question and for the space of a moment or two low voices would parry back and forth only to die in silence again as the speakers drifted back into the cocoon of dreams.

Suddenly the ambulance jerked to a halt, brakes squealing. The truck behind loomed upon them, roared to a halt just in time. A cloud of dust drifted in through the open window and Lee drew back, gagging involuntarily at the smell of rotting human flesh. It filled the cabin, thick, terrifying, sickening beyond belief. The others coughed and cursed and smothered their curses behind cupped hands. Looking up, Lee saw empty leaning walls and gaping windows behind which bright slashes of light came and went and tracers flew above the tottering ruins like flights of bloody arrows.

Far away a clanking echo rose among the shattered piles of stone, drew closer until, with a roar, a column of big tanks hurtled out of the night, twisting through the rubble of the streets to rush past the standing convoy whose drivers were frantically swinging their blue lights. The clank of steel treads echoed and re-echoed, while the thunder of the heavy engines sounded huge and hollow among the broken walls. Then, as suddenly as they had come, the tanks vanished in the night, the noise of their passing dying away in the distance.

Deafened, Lee wiped dust from her face wondering if it carried death with it, death now in her lungs, the pores of her skin. She heard the driver cursing as he let out the clutch and the ambulance jerked forward to resume its slow groping in the blackout. Sighing, she drew back from the window and in the droning, overwarm cabin she grew numb and her eyes heavy with the desire to sleep. . . .

It was slow going, this advancing into the unknown. It took forever . . . forever. A voice advised her gently, "Just watch your step there. It's quite steep, you know. The walls are not as solid as they used to be. Nothing is, you understand, but of course that's to be expected." She was so tired; she sat down to rest on a fallen log and listened as distant thunder reverberated back and forth as though thrown from brawny god to brawny god. There was something else, a strange sound, a far and con-

stant mutter and clank as though iron scrap and metal fragments were sliding down a chute. Puzzled, she stared about her. It was so dark, so murky. It was difficult to see, but wasn't this a street and wasn't she alone in a deserted shattered square? Where? Oh yes, of course, a ruined town in Normandy. Normandy? That was a part of France, wasn't it? Not Parisian. More sound, more fury. Out of the gloom giant steel monsters lumbered toward her, gun muzzles ramming forward as they shook great stones loose from tottering walls and spun great clouds of dust. Over the unearthly shambles weird splashes of light flashed on and off like fabulous neons seen through stark, gaping windows and fallen roofs.

She cowered as the tanks veered past her, rushing into a gray distance without horizon or end, and behind them sluggish clouds, filled with a terrible, heavy smell, boiled up from the rubble and began to whirl and blow among the skeletal walls. Frantically, she sought escape from the suffocating stink of death. She ran up and down the empty streets pursued by the dust and the deathlike stillness of the empty human shell. Trapped, choking in the billowing dust, she fell to her knees and fought to breathe even as death settled over her, pressing her face to the dirt, taking her breath in its sweet, sickening folds.

"No! No!" she cried aloud and woke, jerking upright as the ambulance door swung open, almost tumbling her out. The fresh night air beat against her face and she gulped at it hungrily.

"We're here, Lieutenant. I guess this is it." Corporal Delaney called out of the darkness.

CHAPTER 4

When she stepped into the circle of lights she felt moisture gather under her surgical cap, and ooze under the rubber gloves to form clammy pools in the palms of her hands. Irritably, she tugged at the close fabric of her soiled white jacket, already wet across the shoulders. In the cone of light the heat was oppressive and fetid with the stink of sweat and blood and filth. Beyond it, the surgical tent was, perhaps, a

degree or two cooler though the canvas seemed to sag with its burden of sun.

The three surgical teams moved automatically about their tables beneath the torrid lamps. Their faces, above limp masks, gleamed with the unhealthy pallor of sweat and inordinate weariness. On all sides the tent was littered with the haste and urgency of a night's work. Waste cans were piled with bloody dressings, supply cases were open, their contents jumbled. Plaster cans and antiseptic bottles were set at random on top of packing cases. Great strips of adhesive trailed from any convenient edge. In one corner the big sterilizer hissed on and on, forming a monotonous undertone to the occasional quiet voice, the groan of pain, the labored breathing of the wounded.

"Goddam bouncing betties!" Major Collier cursed beneath his breath as he studied a still-wet set of X-rays on the lighted box.

Lee picked up the patient's limp wrist, black with matted hair, and glanced down the length of his yellow-gray body, the odd color of soiled linen. Tough, tough, she reflected, noting the crimson welter of flesh at abdomen and groin. During the long, long night their cases had all been like this, each one a difficult major operation such as she had seen perhaps a dozen times in her two years as an operating nurse in the Denver hospital. There had been compound fractures, a severed femoral artery, a sucking chest, a crushed chest and a head case they had almost lost.

She had no doubts now about the caliber of the surgeon she served; he was a precise and iron-nerved artist. Under the care of a lesser skill the head case would have surely died on the table. She had no doubt either that all the subtle hints and warnings which had come her way since the posting of platoon assignments in the staging quarters at Weymouth were every bit true. Collier was a hard taskmaster, brusque, chary of praise, quick to blame. Yet, she thought, as long as I can admire. . . .

Under her fingers the pulse fled weak and rapid. Automatically she noted the dilated pupils, the beads of sweat on the man's drained brow.

"Plasma?" she asked as the surgeon came up beside her.

"No, too much bleeding. Whole blood," he replied curtly.

She nodded and turned away to get the bottle of whole blood from the refrigerated container. Fortunately his veins were near the surface and the needle slid home easily. She hung the bottle on its rod, arranged the thin rubber tubing and then turned

to help Mullens prep. Sergeant Mullens was big and rawboned and his hamlike, red-knuckled hands were as deft and gentle as a woman's. He stood on one side of the table prepping, and she on the other, and together they washed away filth and blood, loosened caked pus and shaved hair from the wound area. They were swift and sure, knowing the need to hurry, and they paid little attention to their patient's weak groans.

"Make it pentathol, Lee, and keep close tabs on his blood pressure," Collier ordered from his stand over the light box where he'd returned for another look at the damp translucent X-rays.

"Yes sir."

She prepared the pentathol syringe and stood by, adhesive strips in hand, as he carefully sought the vein and then allowed the anaesthesia to enter drop by drop, his lips moving audibly over the count, nine . . . ten. . . . When he had finished he stepped back, allowing her to secure the needle with the tape so that, if more of the drug proved necessary, it could be administered quickly. She checked the pulse again, fingers to the cold wrist, her eyes fixed on the second hand of her watch. She imagined she heard the man's struggling heart, a faraway beat, too fast, not regular, yet like message drums beating in the depths of a jungle.

Collier returned to the table, stood beside her and stared thoughtfully down at the empty flaccid face. "Well, no help for it." The doctor spoke absently. "Shock and internal hemorrhage, a nice combination. Christ . . ." He shrugged restlessly and moved away. "All right, let's go."

Five minutes later the two technicians were holding retractors against the muscle-sheath of the abdomen and Collier had gone to work, tracing the course of steel slivers, tying off severed blood vessels, debriding dead and damaged flesh. From time to time he would glance at the X-rays plastered against the light box above the instrument table. As time slipped away his face grew strained, his dark eyes intent above the limp gauze mask. He cursed frequently, harshly.

"Christ, a colostomy!" he exclaimed once and went on, his swift sure hands working in and out of the light, wet gloves glistening red and sparks of silver reflecting from the highly polished instruments. Lee leaned far over to sponge blood and matter from the exposed cavity while, with her free hand, she handed Collier the instruments he needed, now for this bit of

probing, that debriding, or clamping, or sewing while her mind raced ahead, trying to anticipate his next requirement.

Once actual surgery was begun, all four of them on the team, herself and Mullens and Sergeant Harris, the second technician, and the surgeon himself, were transformed into highly skilled automatons, performing their tasks wordlessly and working in such a way that the team became as one pair of hands, one brain. As a result, from the moment the knife was laid against living flesh they were caught up in a web of tension and strain, their bodies, nerves and muscles keyed to the infinitely minute care which they must maintain for hours. Like athletes forever training, they became finely drawn; relaxation was impossible.

In the garish circle of lights time wore on slowly. Sweat dripped across the lids of their eyes and, having no hands free, they could only blink it away or let it run unhindered down their cheeks. With every move of her arms, turn of her neck, Lee could feel the stiff weave of her coveralls rub back and forth, irritating her skin to rawness. She felt unbearably hot and stifled and heavily weighted with fatigue. They'd been working . . . how many hours? Twelve at least wasn't it? Twelve hours on their feet with one pause to eat and two breaks for coffee. No wonder they were tired! From the corner of her eye she saw the scowl gather on Collier's forehead and her heart failed. Had she done something wrong? Oh God, had she. . . . No, it was his hands slippery with blood that had moved a fraction of an inch on the handle of his probe. He began to curse in a low monotone and she saw the veins stand out in his sweaty forehead. Hastily she snatched a square of gauze and wiped the sweat away from his eyes and brow.

Seemingly infinite in the dull monotony of reach and hand, swab and turn, hold and bend, time wore on. The foulness and heat under the lights increased as the morning advanced, and the teams, bent in concentration above their tables, began to pant for breath. Rivers of sweat rolled down their faces to soak their masks and course like channeled streams down the hollows of their spines. They had to bend every effort of will to control their slippery gloved hands and to keep open their aching eyes, flinty and blurred with fatigue and heat.

At last, when she was positive that she couldn't bear another moment, Collier straightened, throwing his probe on the table with a faint decisive click. He stepped back to stretch his numb arms and flex his fingers.

"All right," he said wearily, "let's close this up. What's his pressure now?"

"Eighty. Pulse is weak . . . irregular."

"Harris, another bottle of whole blood. . . ."

Fifteen minutes later Collier straightened again. "All yours, Lee. We'll take care of the rest of this mess."

She nodded and went to work applying dressings across the raw sutured abdomen. She heard the surgeon whistle softly and mutter something to the two technicians. Then, louder . . . "He might as well be a goddam vegetable! Look here, Mullens, this is what one of those things can do to a man!"

"Jesus, Major!"

And Harris' boyish voice mumbled in revulsion . . . "That's tough, really tough!"

She glanced sideways and saw the young technician's face pale as he moved heavily, awkwardly to help Mullens apply dressings.

Well, which is worse? she wondered: to be forever dependent on a small bottle and a length of tube to drain off the wastes of your body, or never to be able to make love again? Which harmed human dignity more? She shrugged inwardly, finishing the bandages and moved to the head of the table where she stood, her eyes resting on the unconscious face, absorbed in its emptiness as she automatically reached for the wounded man's wrist.

I think, she thought somberly, if I were you I'd rather be dead. She tried to imagine what his life would be like, a permanent colostomy, wedded to his tubes and bottles and foul odors for the rest of his life and a . . . what was a man called when he couldn't . . . oh yes, a eunuch with no hope of ever. . . . She picked up his medical tag absently and saw that he was twenty-seven. Poor devil. . . .

"We'll immobilize this in a hip spica. Plaster bandages, Lee. Mullens, the sling. Hurry it up! We've got to get him into Shock!"

She noticed that the strain had lifted from Collier's voice, the throbbing veins in his temples had receded. He spoke almost lightly and his movements quickened. He knows, she thought, that this one will be successful.

A moment later they were done. They moved back from the table as the litter bearers came to gently roll their patient onto a stretcher and bear him, bandages and cast, away to the Shock Ward.

Collier stepped up beside her. "Say, baby, take it easy. Don't try so hard. You're doing fine!" He touched her shoulder, his dark eyes above his soaked mask giving her an amused look as she flushed with pleasure. Then he turned away.

A faint thrill ran along Lee's weary nerves. After this night's work she was ready to believe anything about this man. The strangeness of the night, this beginning to their long trek, the close line they'd just crossed between life and death, all combined to make her susceptible to awe. And now he had sealed it with a word of praise, a moment of kindness. There had been few enough figures in her short life on which to pin her faith so that before this sensitive and gifted surgeon she was now ready to spread her devotion, though shyly, of course, and ready to retreat.

"Check Receiving, Lee." His brusque order cut across her musing. "See if you can make a rough estimate of the backlog while you're out there, will you. And be damned sure Samson is sending those who ought to be in Shock right over there. Sometimes those boys out front get careless; as Receiving Officer, you're going to have to be sure they're toeing the mark, even if you have to get tough!"

With this final curt warning he turned and walked out of the furnace of lights to the scrub trough where, with bowed head, he stripped off his gloves and pulled the limp mask from his face. A frown settled across his pale narrow forehead, his lips moved silently as though he reviewed to himself all he had done during the last hour and a half.

Lee scrubbed quickly and hurried off toward the big Receiving Tent.

CHAPTER 5

War broke abruptly across the glittering spring morning as guns thundered on the wooden knoll and the rush of their shells split the air like a night express roaring across the plain. The instantaneous birth of violence drowned the drowsy cricket's cry, cut sharply across the song of a rising lark and shook the earth from its midmorning slumber.

In a small hedge-lined field, at the foot of an artillery-topped hill, the drab tents of the First Platoon were spread in the shape

of a lopsided cross. The entrance to the big tent that served as Receiving was scarcely fifty feet from the narrow country road, and down this passed the traffic of an army moving forwards. The hot June sun poured over the Normandy fields, slanted through the orchards spread along the hills, and leap-frogged the shadows of myriad hedgerows criss-crossing the countryside. It was a burning morning sun, lying bright and ghastly on the charred ruins of a village, on the shell of a stricken Tiger tank upended in a ditch. Bright fingers of sun lay hotly on the dusty canvas, pitiless fingers that scorched and seared the rows of wounded lying on litters beside the tents, only partly sheltered by meager shade.

Now and again, an ambulance drew off the dusty field, came slowly across the rough track to halt before the Receiving Tent and there discharge its load. There would be more litters to join the waiting rows, or more walking wounded to shuffle and hobble among the others sitting in the grass.

All during the early morning hours the ambulances and the jeeps had come bringing the wounded and here they waited, dust and thirst plaguing them, while huge green flies clustered on raw flesh, on oozing pus and blood, on filthy bandages.

A company of tanks came ponderously around the base of the hill and clanked past the hospital toward the ruined village beyond. Their spinning treads threw a gritty, smothering dust over the litters, to cake ashen faces and foul the already labored breathing. Helmeted turret men leaned against their cockpits and looked down in mingled pity and curiosity, and some few raised their hands in a half salute while others averted their faces, white and a little scared.

A platoon of mine sweepers, their long strange apparatus thrown carelessly across their shoulders, came route step down the lane, and they too stared in awe at the littered field as they passed. A convoy of trucks followed, emerging from the dust with bright red flags flapping on crusted mudguards, ammunition trucks, heading for the lines, rolling fast and sure.

Medical corpsmen, oblivious of the occasional shells screaming over the field, moved slowly up and down the rows carrying canteens of water, syrettes of morphine to those who most needed relief. Litter bearers appeared at intervals from the dark entrance of Receiving to select a litter. The rest of the wounded watched, waited, numb with shock or exhaustion, shivering with pain or chill or heat, sick with thirst and hunger

and too much sun, while the morning drew on slowly, endlessly.

In a once-white jacket, now blood spattered and damp with perspiration, on top of dusty coveralls, Lee Caine stepped out into the glaring field, squinting a little against the sudden light. Her surgical mask lay forgotten against her open collar, her sleeves were rolled high on tanned arms, sunlight sparked on the bandage scissors stuck in the top of one legging. Red-rimmed, dust-fretted eyes followed her down the long rows, watching while she bent to examine for shock and hemorrhage and to read the medical tags quickly, searching out cases for immediate surgery and those who should be in the Shock Ward.

She was on her knees beside one litter when a burst of artillery fire on the hill, and the whisper of passing shells headed toward the distant German lines, brought her head up, startled.

"Don't let them bother you, Lieutenant. That's strictly for the *krauts!*" the man on the stretcher whispered, propping himself weakly on one elbow.

She grinned. "I'm glad it's not for me," she replied simply and moved on, drawing back blood-smeared blankets and torn bits of clothing, waving off the clinging flies, prying up corners of pus-encrusted bandages, old and stinking in the heat. The sun beat down on her bare head. Phew! it was hot! She hesitated at the end of one row before starting down another that seemed to stretch without end into the shimmering field. She sighed and bent her aching legs and moved on again to crouch briefly beside each litter.

"How long since you were hit, soldier? Yesterday morning?" Appalled, she passed on.

"Does this hurt? Are you drowsy? Are you cold? Does it hurt too much?" Endless questions and endless reassurances. "Pretty soon, Sergeant. Only a little while longer, sir. We'll take care of you, you'll be all right, soldier." Reassurances that she did not feel. How could she? They would have to wait, and far too long! There were too many of them and only three surgical teams. There was a limit to endurance and to skill; all too obviously there was too little time. Her face grew pale as she looked down on one after another of them; major surgical cases, chest and belly-wounded, gray-yellow and retching weakly; head-wounded, mumbling incoherently, their

eyes rolling in bloody faces; the dozens of compound fractures with here and there a traumatic amputee.

She was not religious, she even doubted the existence of a god. Yet as she stared across this field the question rose unbidden: whom have we offended? And she wondered vaguely, God? Except for religion, her life had been conventional, bound by the limits of her uncle's fretful wife. However, this her uncle had held firm, imparting to her a great deal of his own natural agnosticism. Later, when she was older and able to reason her choice, she had confirmed his scepticism through her own experiences. In some ways it seemed to her, as she looked around her, that this scepticism was wholly warranted and this hot field was proof enough.

She had little time, however, to ponder, for she saw suddenly that something was wrong. There were litters still out here with the red streamers that marked emergency tied to their handles, tied there by herself on her last trip out more than an hour ago. These were men in varying states of shock, men who needed attention and blood at once.

"Damn it!" she cried aloud, signaling frantically for the litter bearers who were gathered near the tunnel-like entrance to the Receiving Tent. "Why didn't you take these men into Shock at once?" she demanded when two corpsmen loped up with streaming faces.

"What? Oh them . . . well, Lieutenant, Sergeant Samson, he's been keeping us running and we. . . ."

"You can see those streamers, can't you?" Angrily she cut them off. "Take them on in to Captain Mason right away, and if I ever find another man left out like this I'll . . . I'll have you court-martialed . . . all of you!"

Flushing, muttering beneath their breath, the two bearers obeyed. As they marched off with the first litter she could hear their sullen anger and their curses, which at first did not bother her.

She waited, trembling with anger, until the last litter was carried away. Then she followed, thinking over and over, they'll die, they'll die . . . an hour in that sun. . . . From the corner of her eye she could see the walking wounded clustering by the tents, brushing fretfully at the flies that swarmed about them. A corpsman bumped into her and she recognized Corporal Albright, the Receiving Clerk.

"Isn't Sergeant Samson checking out here?" she demanded, stopping him.

He looked startled. "I think so, Lieutenant."

"Is he checking the ambulances in, do you know?"

"Why I reckon, ma'am. I don't rightly know," he replied, cautious now before the anger in her voice.

"You'd better help him see to it that those litters I tagged get into Shock right away," and she let him go, her indignation already waning before his sullen look. She felt the old discomfort. They hated it so when a nurse used the rank she was given to cover her own responsibility. They seemed to take it as a personal affront against their manhood.

Damn it, she fumed, I'm the Receiving Officer, I'm responsible for those men. If they die . . . and anyway, why should they die because of someone's heedlessness, someone's stupidity. Her anger grew again and her hesitation was resolved at the sight of an ambulance unloading at that moment and a litter bearer's eloquent gesture toward the end of the rows of litters, as much as to say, "Dump him over there!" There was no sign of the Receiving Sergeant, or any of his three clerks.

Purposefully, she marched into the tent pausing only long enough to acclimate her eyes to the gloomy interior. She saw Samson behind his big field desk, his face in the shadow beyond the pool of light from his shaded lamp as he lolled backward in his chair, feet propped up on a box. Her anger swelled at the sight of those comfortable feet, perhaps, because her own ached so badly. Raging, she marched up to the desk littered with piles of tags and records, personal effects, ammunition, grenades, bandages, syrettes.

"Who's checking those patients in, Sergeant?" she demanded furiously.

"What the . . . oh, Lieutenant Caine." He rose, his startled face appearing out of the shadows to hover above the small light. "What's that?"

"I asked who was checking those patients in out there?" she repeated, her voice shaking with rage. "An ambulance just unloaded and there's no one out there and I just sent to Shock the six emergencies I tagged the last time I was out here. God knows if they'll live or die. Perhaps, you don't care but *I do*. And I can tell you that if the Major had found them there you'd lose your stripes and stand court-martial on top of it and . . ." she stopped, aware of the angry trembling of her voice and a little shamed by it. She was also aware of the loitering silent corpsmen and litter bearers.

Sergeant Samson's look of surprise had turned to anger but at the mention of Collier his eyes dropped and he replied humbly: "There must be some mistake, Lieutenant. Are you sure you tagged those men? I was out there just a minute ago. You can ask Mulaney here if I wasn't, eh Mulaney?" he turned for corroboration to a slim, dark-haired young corporal slouched in a chair beside his own.

"Sure he was, Lieutenant," Mulaney replied smoothly and grinned.

"If you're saying I'm lying . . ." she began but Samson interrupted her quickly.

"No, no . . . I must have missed them. I'll be more careful but we are checking . . . Mulaney, get that ambulance." He jerked his thumb towards the exit. "Sorry, Lieutenant, you can see we're sort of busy here and all that . . ." and he gestured at his disordered desk, his voice smooth though his face was sullen, his eyes wary.

She was off balance then. She could have sworn that in all the fifteen to twenty minutes she'd been out there in the field he had not once been out to check, nor had Mulaney, his assistant. But before the impervious male rank she retreated. They could not, they would not, take it from a woman, and she could have kicked herself for the flush that climbed her throat and cheeks. Irresolute, unable to think of anything to say, she hesitated before him, her eyes straying over the desk again, noting now the half-eaten candy bar, the coffee steaming in its cup, the cigarette still smoking in an old C-ration can.

Her anger flared momentarily. All the comforts of home! Samson could sit here eating and drinking, and other men could lie out there in the heat and sun, in pain, dying for all he knew or cared. Other men could get their wounds, perhaps their deaths, saving the skin of this one, who just happened to be a trifle better educated, a trifle more mannered and thus, a clerk. How strange, she thought, to lack the conscience, even the good will to care.

"All right," she said lamely and walked off without bothering to mask her contempt. She felt his eyes on her and could almost catch the whispered, "—— you!" He'd have said it, they all did and for the same reasons.

Depressed, she returned to Surgery to find it empty except for Collier who was busy signing papers spread out on a crate.

"Well, what's the bad news?" he demanded, his straight brows arching in question.

"About eighty litter cases and I counted sixty-three walking wounded," she replied gloomily.

"Christ!" he groaned and looked at his watch. "With what's in Shock then we must have a backlog of over a hundred major cases! Well, let's eat. Thirty minutes and back to work we go." He caught her elbow and guided her from the tent. "Cheer up, you'll live through it," he grinned at her discouraged face.

With an effort she roused herself. "Yes, I guess I will," she murmured.

"Well, you don't sound too sure. Let's change the subject. What do you hear from China, or is that discouraging too?" he said conversationally as they walked across the meadow towards the kitchen tent at the back of the hospital.

"Nothing. You haven't brought us any mail."

"That's right, so I haven't. We've been busy this last week, we might say, no time for tea and toast, etc. Seriously, we should have mail call within another week though, so don't eat out your heart and think it's the end of passion."

"No," she replied, utterly unable to meet his light sarcasm.

"Why do you hide your ring, may I ask?"

She looked up, startled. "Hide? Oh no . . . I have it here," and she ran her fingers along the dog-tag chain around her neck and touched the ring. "It bothers me, under the rubber gloves, you know. If I took it off though, I'd lose it . . ."

He laughed, and she was too tired to comprehend his amusement. The ring was all she had left. Of course there were the infrequent but long letters, but the ring alone was the solid symbol of the three fleeting and passionate months of her marriage and all that it had meant to her. She looked back on it numbly as a great awakening, a great stirring from the somber sleep of her orphaned and not happy childhood. She had not known before that she could experience such an intensity of love.

"What does he fly anyway? Transports over the Hump or something?"

"No, fighters."

"Lone-wolf type I suppose. Do you worry, Lee?" Collier, suddenly sober, looked down at her speculatively.

Her heart was in her throat, scalding tears twitched and burned her eyes and she almost, but not quite, burst into tears.

For this one moment his tone had been warm with sympathy and she was so tired it acted as an immediate catalyst. She only just caught herself in time. And so she nodded her head idiotically several times. It was all she could do.

"Why in hell did you kids bother? Wartime marriages are the height of stupidity. You can't even squeeze in a decent honeymoon, let alone settle down. What do you expect out of it all? That you'll wind up the same and he'll come back to you the same? Hell, there never was a saying untruer than that absence makes the heart grow fonder. What's it been, a year? I thought so. How's he going to remember you or you him at the end of another year, for God's sake? How does any man remember a mistress of a few short weeks after he's been gone for years? He doesn't, at least not very concretely! Especially if he's young and at war and somebody else comes along in the flesh . . . a pretty CBI nurse for instance." He shrugged and grinned down at her. "And you, do you remember so damn well? Did you remember your precious Robert at all those dances in England with those dashing young flyboys at Cirencester? As I recall, you weren't adverse to having a little fun . . . and yet you're sure now you remembered him all those times? . . . remembered well?"

"Of course!" she cried stung, yet knew her protest all the stronger from her inner uncertainty. Remember? What? Only that she had loved, that she had been happy . . .

"Ah, love . . ." he said.

"You've said that before," she reminded him bitterly.

He laughed, dropping her arm as they arrived at the kitchen tent. "So I have. Christ! Not hash again! Can't you cook anything else, Henry?"

"It ain't me, Major. It's what they send down in them C-rations!"

"In other words, TS, eh?"

Gingerly they carried their loaded messkits and the big awkward canteen cups filled with scalding coffee to the table set aside for the unit's officers. The others were already there, well launched on their meal, their voices fumbling through a rehash of the night's cases as they slumped wearily above their food.

"Jesus, I used more whole blood last night than I'd have used in a month in Boston!" Carl George said in an unbelieving voice. He was a lanky New Englander of thirty or so with a thin pale face and craggy brows that sat incongru-

ously upon his narrow forehead, dominating his otherwise boyish features. Shortly after joining the X Field Hospital in England he had quite warmly and unwisely professed himself dedicated to the field of obstetrics and had, thereafter, been unmercifully ribbed. When all other conversation failed his colleagues turned to him. "Great practice for an OB man like yourself, George." "The Army needs you, son!" and "How many prenatal cases did you turn up in the division today, eh?" He joined them in their laughter, and every now and then was made happy by a pregnant nurse or WAC or Red Cross girl needing his skills. Whether they were married or not bothered him not at all; he was pleased with them for giving him a chance to refresh his training.

"How about you, Joe? Use a lot?"

Captain Joseph Allen, the third surgeon of the platoon, nodded. "Like water," he said. He was short, fat, near forty, and a self-indulgent little man. He felt himself ill-used because he had been assigned to a field hospital instead of a general where life would have been more comfortable, and because, in spite of his years and his long practice, he was still a captain whereas Collier, a much younger man, was not only a major but commanded the platoon. Allen made no bones about his various complaints, everyone in the unit had heard them at least a dozen times, even the corpsmen. And no one liked him very much.

The fifth officer of the unit was Second Lieutenant MacDonald, a medical administrative officer who was a combination of executive officer, adjutant, detachment commander and chief clerk. The men called him Willie and disliked him with a hard and reasoning hatred. Others thought him merely stupid.

"And the blood shall flow like water!" Mason cried, echoing Allen. He shook his big head and looked discouraged.

"Yes, and time to make it flow again." Collier stood abruptly, consulted his watch and stalked off across the field toward the hospital. More reluctantly the others rose to follow.

As she walked back beside her chief nurse Lee felt piqued. One moment Collier seemed actually interested in her, and the next he ignored her completely. I don't understand him at all, she thought. He frightens me, yet I like him, I like talking to him. Poor man, he shouldn't have to care why

I live and breathe. Still, she knew she wanted him to do just that.

As if reading her thoughts Effie asked suddenly, "Well, kid, how's it going? You think you'll be okay on that high-pressured team of his?"

"I don't know. I hope so, Effie."

"Oh you're good enough for him. Don't let that discourage you. You've got more training than the rest of us put together. None of us did post-grad work, you know. It's him that'll make you wonder if you're head-up or ass-up!"

"Everything's fine so far," Lee said, a little doubtfully.

"Good." The older woman gave her a shrewd look. "Just step carefully, baby. He likes us girls, you know."

"Oh?" Lee raised her eyebrows.

"Sure. You've heard the stories."

Yes, she'd heard the stories. The nurse she'd replaced as assistant on his team had been mysteriously transferred from the platoon, leaving behind sniggers and insinuations that spoke of some sort of liaison between herself and the boss. Then there was the story of the English girl at Taunton who, accompanied by her mother, had come to call on Colonel Simons, the hospital CO. "Big as a house she was!" the old hands cried, chiming their ribald laughter, and the mother had implicated the major in her daughter's downfall. Then there'd been some vaguer tale of a nurse pregnant in Africa and shipped home as a suspect TB case over the major's signature.

Lee had found these tales upsetting, both because she could not actually believe them, and also because, like a voice half-heard yet pointedly direct, they seemed to have a special meaning for her. They served to make her both uneasy and curious about this restless, nervous, sardonic man who was, already for her, somewhat of a medical god.

"Yes," she replied to Effie now. "Yes, I've heard the stories. I like him though. I think he's the finest surgeon I've ever worked for and probably ever will work for."

"Oh sure but don't *like* him."

"Why not?"

"If you do well . . . TS, baby," was the cryptic answer. "Here, let's go on through Receiving and take a look at what's waiting for us . . . !" and she plunged down the narrow entrance into the murky tent.

The dirt floor was patterned by brown blankets, grayish faces, soiled bandages and yellow flesh, while in the deeper

gloom a long line of silent men sat hunched forward on low benches placed along the tent walls. Ashen faces turned dully, indifferently, as the two nurses entered, but few of them were able to register beyond their own hurt and fear and they lay or sat with a numb patience and weariness, though others might moan in pain or babble in delirium or burst into spasms of frantic obscenity.

A few talked quietly among themselves. "This here's a picture of my wife. She's kinda fat but she's some looker! That's my kid there, a boy. Let's see, I guess he oughta be about three now. When'd I last see him? Oh hell, it's been a couple of years. I was down to Fort Bragg for nine months and she was with me but she hadda leave the kid with her ma. You know how them big camps were . . . no damn place to live, much less keep a kid, and anyway she hadda work to keep him in shoes and all. By God, he must be close to four! Now whatta you know! I damn well can't remember. Christ, but a fellow misses his wife, don't he? A guy's gotta have a woman now and then or he goes nuts. I was going nuts, all right, but I sure found out these mademoiselles are pretty good. Can't understand 'em though. They've got funny ways, these Frenchies. Different. Know what I mean? But it's all good! Takes a man's mind offa this goddam war!"

Sergeant Samson hurried up, appearing not to notice Lee behind her chief. "Jesus, Captain Newcomer, am I glad to see you! We just got a case that . . ."

"Talk to Lieutenant Caine, Sergeant. I got to hurry," and Effie walked off leaving Samson with no other choice than to hand the extended medical tag to the younger nurse.

Lee looked at it quickly. "Where is he?" she asked.

"Over here," he replied sullenly and led her to a litter placed near the entrance beside a pile of clean blankets.

Sighing, she knelt in the dirt. There was little question that the man was in shock. His eyes were turned up in his head with only the bloodshot whites visible in the dirty gray of his face. His lips were cracked and drawn back from teeth coated with mucous. At the lower end of the litter the blanket was carefully folded back from legs amputated around the knee and wrapped in huge awkward masses of gauze. Bilateral amputation! The words drifted through her head as she noted blood spreading wet and thick over the outer surface of the crude pressure bandages, fresh blood, still bright, dribbling

drop by drop to form a thick, drying pool in the bed of the litter.

She started to rise when her eyes caught the motion of one clenched fist lying across the blanketed chest. Startled, she glanced again at the pallid face to find him conscious after all. The mucous-filled eyes stared up at her anxiously, blue eyes that shone with the dried glaze of fever. He sucked in his lips trying to speak but his own vomit had caked so thickly on his swollen tongue that only a low moaning broke from his struggling throat.

"Lie still." She touched the straining filthy lips with her fingers to quiet him. "Lie still. We're taking care of you," and got to her feet quickly. "Take him to the major's table right away," she ordered and hurried to Surgery.

"Ours?" Collier asked, jerking his thumb at the following litter as she joined him at the scrub table.

"Yes. Traumatic amputation, bilateral I think. He's hemorrhaging badly."

"Christ! You and Mullens prep. Start whole blood right away."

"Yes sir." Pulling on her gloves and tying her mask as she went she dodged around litter bearers bringing in cases for the other two teams and arrived beside her table just as the two technicians, their faces shocked and incredulous, lifted the man to the table.

"My God, Lee!" Mullens muttered in her ear as he rounded the table to prep on the far side.

Together they cut away the remains of the fatigue pants. Harris brought the whole blood and she started it in the vein and then returned to help prep. The case was a mess; one leg was blown cleanly away just below the knee joint while what was left of the other hung twisted and mangled from the upper part of the thigh, apparently connected to the rest of the body by a few strands of flesh and muscle.

"Leave the rest of that gauze there, Mullens," Collier ordered sharply as he came up to the table. "Harris, we need a tourniquet. He's losing blood fast from that stump . . . damn!"

"Here, too, sir."

"All right. Make it a general, Lee."

She nodded and went to roll the heavy nitrous oxide and oxygen tanks into position. As she worked with cocks and mask she glanced at the pale face and saw the boy's lips mov-

ing still, the blue eyes fixed on her mutely as she worked. He's just a kid, she thought, and reaching behind her took a damp bit of waste and sponged the filth and mucous from his mouth, leaving the damp gauze a moment on his lips. He sucked at it gratefully and with a swift stab of compassion she ran her hand lightly over his stubbled cheek and short blond hair. Just a kid. She leaned over him to remove the gauze and managed to smile into the terrified blue eyes. It wasn't any use! She knew that suddenly. It wasn't going to be any use. The bright sheen of those frightened eyes spoke of death; it was as plainly there as if he had spoken aloud. He stared with unwavering desperation at her and moved his lips until, as if from a great distance, his voice rose in a husky rustling whisper.

"Am I . . . am I going . . . it hurts, oh please, it hurts . . ." he pleaded, begging her reassurance even as the realization that the thread of life was wearing thin glimmered in the glazed and panicked depths of his eyes.

"For God's sake, can't you hear me? Get him under . . ." Collier broke off, stooped beside her to bring his head closer to those moving lips while she straightened and moved to her machine. A sick fear washed over her, leaving her shaken and numb with dread. She saw the major bend over the dying boy whose lips still fumbled hopelessly, who was so afraid, so afraid. No expression crossed Collier's lean face, no trace of feeling darkened his weary eyes as he stretched out a thin miraculous hand and closed it gently over the boy's naked shoulder, a firm strong touch that closed the pleading lips and lonely frightened eyes, a strange warm touch that held peace or courage, even hope. And beneath it the young soldier's mangled body relaxed, his chest rose on a faint sigh that hung oddly in the stillness. The surgeon straightened, removed his hand and turned swiftly to his work.

Thinking about it later, Lee felt sure that this strangely commanding hand was the last contact the boy ever knew, the last bond with the living to penetrate his loneliness and fear. Perhaps, he had understood from this gesture that nothing more could hurt him. At any rate he breathed deeply when she settled the cone over his nose and mouth and he went under without fighting the gas. They started working immediately, struggling to control the hemorrhages even as they poured fresh blood into collapsing veins.

But after twenty minutes she had felt the abrupt break in

the shallow rapid pulse beneath her fingers, the uneven slowing of the heart to a sudden, startling cessation followed a fraction of a second later by a frantic lurch as though it were making one last effort to beat again. The harsh breath had seemed terribly loud and labored in the bladder; she had leaned over to snatch away the cone from the bluish face as the body shuddered, backbone arching convulsively; then a shrill sigh whistled from the collapsing lungs. The heart had stopped; the boy lay still.

The swift sounds of struggle and defeat ceased in the close circle of light while the surgical team stood around the table staring down in disbelief, bewilderment and even revulsion. Collier took two quick steps to the head of the table where he gazed down at the mask-like face etched naked and stark beneath the pitiless lights. Every feature under the bloodless skin was sharpened and defined by the glare, every pore, every defect of molded flesh bared and rendered defenceless in death. The cracked, soiled lips pouted faintly, the blue eyes shone drily beneath half-closed lids, and the square hands, still retaining the brown of the sun, lay uncurled along the table. Carefully, Collier placed a stethoscope on the unmoving chest, then, without a word, he threw the instrument on the table and walked off.

The sharp clink of metal brought the others out of their trance. They moved around to gather instruments hooked in the draping sheets, and Harris reached up and carefully turned off the lights as they circled the body, removing sponges, clips, and instruments.

Slowly Lee pulled the transfusion needle from the limp arm and, almost with caution, untied the strap of the gas cone from the unmoving throat. As if in a dream she saw the light blond hairs curling on the sunken chest and the clipped blond hair lying as closely as a cap on the round oddly childish skull.

Now, she thought, I must call the litter bearers. They'll come and take him away, take all that's left here, this inert lump of dead flesh, soiled and blood stained. They'll cart him out of these hellish lights and this heat and they'll dump him across the field in that little square tent that's the morgue and there he'll begin to rot under the sun, to rot and smell, just another bit of carrion in all of stinking Normandy. She looked down at the lips that had pled, half-open over stained teeth, and at the eyes that had been so frightened and were now so still.

All right! With an impatient gesture she slipped the medical tag from the litter handle still lying with its pool of blood

on the floor beside the table. With absent fingers she noted the time of death . . . died of wounds. Twenty! He'd seemed younger . . . eighteen. A tanker. Only this morning, perhaps, in the cool of dawn when the dust had not yet risen over the roads, and the dew had lain misty across the hedges and meadow grass, he'd passed along the road in his lumbering tank, sitting alert and eager in his metal seat, braced with expectation and a little fear for the combat ahead. Perhaps, he had passed even as she had emerged from this tent; tanks had gone by as she stood wearily at the back entrance and he might have been there, one of those boys so grimly erect in the hatches, one of them going forward, still hopeful and alive in the early morning, caring still that the air was fresh and cool and that birds sang in the hedgerows.

"Litter bearers!" she cried abruptly and left him. At the scrub table she stood with bent head, automatically stripping off her soiled gloves to stand there fumbling with them, forgetful of what it was she must do next. Behind her she heard the bearers come, heard the soft thud of the body being rolled from the table and then the heavy shuffling feet, the uneven stumble and step that created a dirge of a sort as they carried him away. At the other tables voices murmured, heedless, the autoclave hissed monotonously on and on and somewhere beyond the canvas wall an ambulance door clanged open.

Ah well . . . she dropped her bloody gloves into a waste pail and bent to scrub again. Death would come again and again; it would be no stranger. She moved to an equipment case and began to set out fresh packages of gauze. Yes, why should I care? She knelt by the packing case, stared into it absently. When had the guns stopped? Lawrence. They'd probably called him Larry. Twenty years . . . not as far as she had come herself. It wasn't much time, twenty years was no more than a beginning. He hadn't married; perhaps he hadn't known love, not really. But it isn't my death, she thought almost triumphantly. It isn't my death. . . .

"Next case." The voice was curt, imperative.

Next case? Yes, of course. Here was the next case and beyond it another and another. She rose and moved once more into the lights losing her distraught self before the sight of another rigid pallid body, bloody and quivering with pain. The cropped round head and pleading eyes were replaced by others drawn with suffering and fear and others came to pout, lifeless and inert beneath the merciless lights.

CHAPTER 6

In the swift succession of days a nightmare backwash of war swept over the First Platoon. An endless flow of mangled bodies, the wounded of two divisions, poured into their tents and there were many days when the litters overflowed into the dusty fields to form an all but impossible backlog for the sweating surgical teams. When this happened the mortality rate seemed to rise with each new litter brought in: Dead-on-Arrival; Died-of-Wounds; and the blanket-covered forms, placed hastily in shadowed corners of the hospital, a dark place in Receiving or along the wall of the central square between Shock and Surgery, were mute testimony of too few medical units arrived in Normandy too late.

And still they came, torn, bloody, in pain. They came in jeeps and ambulances, sometimes in trucks and weapon carriers and there seemed to be no end. Motors idled beside the entrance of Receiving; steps clanged into place as ambulance doors were yanked open. The weary teams could actually hear the scrape of litters being lifted out, the muttered curses of the bearers and, now and then, a choked scream, a cry for help, or the insistent aggressive cursing of a man in pain.

"For Christ's sake, guys, take it easy, can'tcha?"

"Oh my God, my God! Gimme water. . . . Ah, you bastards, gimme some water!"

Flailed on by these sounds of urgency that persisted through the nights and far into the mornings, beginning again at evening, the surgeons and their teams drove themselves feverishly. Each hour under the white circle of lights they rose to an increasingly desperate climax of human skill and will power against human exhaustion. Gloved hands shone redly as they wove in and out of the light, creating a pattern of their own as they cut away dead flesh from ragged wounds, washed filth and mucous from torn bodies, probed metal fragments from the depths of living tissue. Quick sure fingers in sterile rubber worked at plaster casts and gauze dressings; steeled fingers, careful and controlled, tied off severed blood vessels, nerve ends,

muscle fibers, while sweat poured from foreheads and eyes strained to see.

Their lungs ached, their stomachs were sickened by the smell of fresh blood mixed with the stench of vomit, strong sweat and urine. Often their hands trembled with weakness and sometimes they slipped.

Thus, the hot dusty days of June, filled with fighting and rumors of fighting, passed on. They formed breathless weeks of suffocating heat and slow, blood-chilling victories for the Allies that gradually dispelled the doubts and the suspense of the first days when it seemed more than likely that the Germans would be able to push them backward into the sea.

By the middle of the month the situation of the troops on the Normandy Peninsula was greatly improved. The X Division, with one regiment committed to action on D-day, had established a corridor across the peninsula several miles in width. Two regiments turned north, preparing to jump off in an attack on the ancient town of Bricquebec, the first German-held position on the winding midland route to Cherbourg, the only Normandy port of any consequence, and one that the Allies were eager to get their hands on. The Third Regiment, with units of another division, moved on to the coast and turned north and south to begin a pincer movement of the trapped enemy troops.

The First Platoon was moved forward as medical support for these latter elements and ordered to set up operations in the badly shelled town of Saint-Sauveur-le-Vicomte-sur-Douve, a small rural village despite its regal name. Situated on the banks of the narrow placid river Douve, Saint-Sauveur was by this time no more than a battered husk. It had twice been the scene of bitter fighting, having been designated a jump-in spot for an allied air-borne division on D-day and, a few weeks later, a defensive position for the retreating Germans. Dawn of the 17th of June found several rifle companies still mopping up minor German positions a mile or so south of the town while, on its eastern outskirts, the First Platoon's small convoy turned into a level field and there prepared to set up their tents.

The once pleasant little Normandy village lay stark and shattered in the growing light. Thin black columns of smoke rose lazily above the ruined buildings and flames still licked at the blackened shells of several tanks and an overturned half-track on the narrow cobbled streets. The breeze of early day

carried the combined stench of the town's dead mingled with roasted flesh from the smouldering vehicles, and the odd dank smell of cellars now exposed. At the foot of a shell-pierced wall running along the main road, three sodden forms lay sprawled in a ditch, while at one corner a silenced German anti-tank gun tipped muzzle forward in the grass. On the far side of the wall in an old and elaborate cemetery, iron crosses, garlanded with rusted streamers of tin flowers, looked garish and durable. The square stone church at the graveyard's head had sustained heavy artillery fire. The steeple, used possibly as an observation post, was literally severed from the main body of the building and only a few twisted metal uprights and rotten wooden beams rose naked and forlorn from the riddled stone.

As the platoon unloaded near this battered church, they heard heavy machinegun fire on the distant side of town and, occasionally, the answering rattle of a German burp gun. Once a burst of small-arms fire sounded fairly close, while down a distant street, a single rifle snapped, sending echoes ringing from the empty walls. As the unit worked to raise tents and unload gear, a weird, unearthly file of humanity appeared on the road from the blasted village, a strange halting procession of folk winding dazed and shocked from the cellars and the rubble. For three days they had crouched in the ruins of their town enduring the shelling and the bombing with a patience that was animal and a fear that had numbed. Now, one by one, or in small surviving family groups they stumbled out of the smoking silence and up the road toward their ruined church where "les docteurs Americains" had come. How they knew this so quickly no one could later explain.

Some of them pulled rickety hand carts loaded with a badly mangled friend or relative; one or two drove slow oxen hitched to a manure wagon to carry the hurt. The greater number came supporting each other, leading stunned bloodied children, a moaning man or woman through the dust. In the clearing light of morning this slow shuffling column seemed like a modern artist's distorted conception of the century, tormented bodies of mankind dragging their dank battered souls up out of Hell to the last of all judgments.

The platoon worked desperately over this unexpected influx of civilian wounded, losing the few precious hours of sleep that they had thought would be theirs. All too soon, they knew, the sun would be at the middle point of noon, then rushing downhill to dusk. And as the shadows lengthened and the sky

darkened, aid men would begin their cautious crawl through the hedge-lined fields to seek out the wounded. The hospital field would echo again to the sounds of ambulance engines, men cursing, the stomp of boots and the all too familiar grunts and cries and stifled moans.

One woman came clutching a dead child in a tight unbelieving grip. With the others she stood in the murky Receiving Tent and rained kisses on the small still face, her tears mixing with the blood and dirt of the child's stained skin, to run down over the placid cheeks as though the child wept at its own plight. She was a gaunt madwoman staring with grief-crazed eyes at anyone who sought to remove the limp, soiled body. Her bony hands clutched and tore to keep the lifeless token of her child. Sickened, Lee explained over and over in her smattering of schoolgirl French that the child was dead; must be taken away; she, the mother, must believe, she must let them assist, there was nothing. . . . But the madwoman only shook her head, rolled her eyes, and turning suddenly, stumbled from the tent, still clutching the child to her withered breasts. They let her go. They watched her weave across the field. There wasn't time.

Harried by both sides alike, these village people had no choice for what cause they would die or by whose hands, so their suffering was without meaning and their death was empty. No memorials would ever stand for them, no graven words say that they gave for the glory of their land, no one would ever idealize their sacrifice. They were no more than animals trapped in damp cellars, hiding in craven fear of this death that loomed too large for their understanding and carried to them nothing more than ignoble decay.

By evening they had ceased to come, the field was filled instead with the murmur of idling engines, the sharp clang of opening doors and the tramp of the bearers in the gathering dusk. Day moved into night and the night again to day. The days scrambled and jammed together until the platoon had passed a week in the field beside Saint-Sauveur. Then it laid down its tools, packed swiftly and was ready once again to move on.

In the open field beside the kitchen tent, most of the medical personnel sat wearily at the board tables listlessly eating K-ration breakfasts and, more gratefully, drinking the strong black coffee that was the essence of life these days. Lee leaned both elbows on the splintered wood, letting her shoulders sag. The fragrance of the coffee sent a small pleasure to her tired senses

as, half-aware, she listened to the tired voices speaking into the deadened peace of the morning.

". . . and I couldn't even get him debrided properly. Had to send him on to Tim, hold off awhile."

"God, what a night!"

"Fifteen minutes more and I tell you I'd been under the goddam table . . . no kidding!"

A hoarse voice cried out in the field where a crew of men were dismantling the tents, and an answering curse fell across the quiet. In the kitchen tent, tin rattled loudly against tin and the faint hiss of the field range whispered on and on.

"Well, what the hell! We've got all day to sleep! A whole damn furnace of a day! At least we get a break, ten hours that is. . . ." she heard George say, his voice rough with weariness.

"And I tell you it's too damned much work for any man!" Allen cried. "We can't keep it up! Christ, what does he think we are? Supermen?"

"I don't know . . ." someone replied softly. "It's not his . . ."

A hand fell lightly on Lee's shoulder. With an effort she straightened, turned, and saw Collier standing behind her, a tin cup steaming in his hand. Grudgingly, she moved a little to allow him space on the bench beside her.

"Hell of a night, eh kid?" he smiled at her and set his coffee down with extravagant care and she saw the tremor of his hand. The hot brown liquid slopped over to form a small pool on the boards. Around her the voices drifted off to silence and a lark began to sing, so sweetly that she sighed.

"Yes," she said, "a hell of a night."

There were dark circles of fatigue beneath his eyes and a slight nervous tic trembled in the corner of his left one. He looks awful, she thought.

His smile faded, annoyance passed like a shadow across his pallid face. "Do I pass inspection?" he demanded sarcastically.

Startled, she looked away, feeling the warm blood rise beneath her skin. All right! Be like that . . . but the small hurt lacerated her shyness all over again. He had the power to hurt as had no one else she'd ever known. If he'd never paid her any attention it couldn't matter, she would still be impervious both to his annoyance and to his amusement, she would have remained as she had begun, liking him yet respecting him more and fearing him not a little.

Unfortunately, as she was beginning to realize, he'd paid her too much attention. She was already flattered by his interest,

flattered, and, led on to tell him much too much about herself. Perhaps he was bored. It wouldn't surprise her if he was. Oh damn him! she thought helplessly.

Now he ignored her, turned to George on his far side and began to talk to him in low tones. All right . . . it was all right, wasn't it? I deserve it, she thought less sullenly. What did I expect anyway? Why should he waste breath on me? She pushed back from the table and was starting to her feet when he swung around.

"Hey, where're you going?"

"Why I . . . to sleep, of course."

"No, wait. I want to talk to you. Look, I'll come along if you don't mind."

Startled, she fell into step beside him as he rose and took her arm.

"I won't keep you more than a minute. Time it takes to smoke one cigarette, okay?"

She nodded and dunked her canteen cup and messkit in the greasy boiling water of the dish cans, then waited while he did the same. On the defensive, made stiffly uneasy by the abruptness of this change again, she wondered fleetingly if he was angry with her. But for what? She cast about trying to think of any mistakes she might have made, of something she might have said.

"Relax, I don't bite!" he said as he joined her. From the corner of her eye she saw several corpsmen turn their heads; one of them laughed softly.

"I'm glad to hear it," she replied, a little rattled. He didn't sound angry especially.

Actually, Collier was so weary that he was euphoric; he bubbled with the exhilaration of sheer exhaustion. His dark eyes were very bright, his pale cheeks flushed, and the hand that caught her arm trembled.

"Guess what?" he said, matching his step to her shorter one. "I'm a free man today. That is, I'm supposed to be. There's no telling till the mail starts coming."

"Free man?"

"Yes. Free. . . . Man. Today is the day I'm supposed to have my final decree. No more Mrs. Collier. I'm free, she's free, only she's rushing to jump in the fire again. She's marrying, a lawyer this time, in fact her lawyer for this little affair. Ironical, isn't it?"

Lee could only nod, at a loss.

He squeezed her arm and laughed, a gay and hectic sound. "Ah, don't look so like a frightened child, Lee. You don't have to commiserate with me. I really don't care. No, that's not true, I do care. I'm glad to be rid of Sylvia, damned glad! Anyway, I'm a prize son-of-a-bitch with the ladies. You've heard that, I'm sure, so it can't be her fault now, can it?"

Again she was caught helplessly while he looked down at her, seeming to expect an answer of some sort. She remembered once when he'd been talking about his wife that he'd said lightly, off-hand, as though it really concerned him little: "She married me, you know, because she thought me a rising young neuro-surgeon bound to gather an expensive practice in Westchester. The war came along and spared her a huge disappointment, but she was very brave about seeing me off to Africa. Her courage lasted until I'd sailed over the horizon and then her naturally forceful brain took over. She realized then what I knew all along . . . that I wouldn't have made the grade in Westchester. Not that I haven't the makings of a big neuro-surgeon drawing down plenty of dough and all that, but it's merely . . . well, a matter of social distinction, and/or lack of distinction, perhaps I should say!"

He sounded as if he didn't really give a damn, and yet there was enough uncertainty behind his glib self-mockery to make Lee wonder.

Abruptly he dropped her arm and looked away from her across the hot field and his voice turned harsh and moody. "I'm tired. I'm too damned tired to be glad about anything, much less think about anything. What in hell can a man's little domestic crisis mean stacked up against all this? Not a goddam thing! Still, I suppose there will come a day when we'll be going home and we'll have to face up to these things of that other existence. Yet, what can they matter? Lee, do you understand? They can't possibly matter, they're of another world and another time, and they have no earthly meaning here. This is my mature and considered advice to you, baby; remember it well. Nothing over here can matter back there, and vice versa. Live with this in mind and maybe you can survive this thing, if it doesn't last forever and God knows. . . . God knows it might."

He sighed, his mouth sagging at the corners. "Hell, this isn't what I was going to say to you. I'd a little speech all planned. Hold up a second and let me deliver it with the proper gestures. . . . There, that's better . . ." as she stopped and turned to look up into his face, her brows knitting in bewilderment. "It's very

simple . . . don't look so damn anxious. I'm not reaming you! The very opposite. I merely wanted to have an opportunity to tell you that you've been doing a damn good job and I'm glad to have you on my team. Keep it up and there's no reason why we shouldn't die the best of pals. Now run along and get some sleep." He squeezed her arm again, turned on his heel and walked off, leaving her to stare after him.

"But Ed . . ." The whisper was lost in the shimmer of heat rising over the parched meadow. He strode on, unhearing and unheeding, his shoulders hunched with his body's weariness. A small happiness leapt like a flame in her heart and tending it carefully against the horrid weight of her own fatigue she went on to her tent and to sleep.

CHAPTER 7

It's only a dream! It's not real, it's only a dream!

Distorted faces swirled and eddied from yawning black pits and each emerged clearly for an instant before it drowned again. Gray featureless faces at first, strange and cruel and grown familiar even in their distortion until once again, they were there beneath the glaring lights, every detail defined; filthy faces, shivering with pain, known and yet unknown and strange as the echo of an unheard cry.

Oh God, it's only a dream!

She came almost to the surface of troubled sleep and hovered there until wheeling darkness closed abruptly over the faces and drew them down into moving depths and in their place rose yet another image, equally strange, equally familiar. She dreamed that she was back in Surgery but the canvas walls seemed to solidify to a hard gleaming white and with a sense of shock she recognized the operating theater at the Denver hospital where she had trained. The walls were blank, sterile, blind reflecting surfaces; the lights were ten times brighter than normal as was every detail of the room. The shining instruments hard and cruel, the mysterious cloaked and hooded figures bending over an ordinary chipped porcelain-enamelled kitchen table, the putrid grayish flesh exposed by soiled draping

sheets—all sprang in unmerciful clarity before her sleeping eye, cruel, edged, distorted.

The surgeon whose hands tore into the open bloody wound turned full face now and she saw that the eyes staring through holes in the white hood were blind and blank as the walls; blank empty eyes that menaced, staring as the stone eyes of a statue. Startled, she glanced from the surgeon to the man stretched on the table. He was smiling up into the hooded blind faces, a trusting smile, the smile of a child. Even as she looked blood rose thick and red and faintly steaming to come between her and the white staring wall; the smell of it, sweet and cloying, drifted strongly into her dream. She saw its source, the slashed meat of a leg stump where it rose in rhythmic spurts in spite of the tourniquet bound tightly in swollen flesh. A white-coated, blind-eyed assistant was trying to tighten the strap but, as she watched, his blank eyes assumed sight and an expression of terror; his gloved hands strove to tighten even as the strap began to loosen as though forced apart by some tremendous hidden pressure within the stump itself. The metal bar began to unwind and the blood flowed faster, thicker.

The assistant's eyes grew sick as it welled over his hands. The muscles of his shoulders bulged beneath his coat. He leaned far over the table and his hood fell off, revealing a wildly distorted face, the lips drawn back in a horrible desperate grin that was almost idiotic in its intensity. Still staring, still grimacing, his hands suddenly relinquished the tourniquet, and as the blood gushed from the stump he buried his head in his soiled arms with a gesture of utter despair.

Horrified, she tried to move forward, to help, but even as she strained every muscle in her body she could not move an inch across the intervening dead white space. The growing slimy channel of blood widened between her and the white walls, between her and the preoccupied white-robed figures with eyes of stone.

An unreasoning panic seized her. She must help! It was her duty! She must tell them what was happening! The surgeon . . . ! All unheeding, he went about his work in the gray flesh. Helpless, she looked again upon the smiling child face resting on the table and saw that now the smile had died away and the laughing eyes had begun to glare. They met hers and stared in accusation, then grew slowly frightened and the child mouth twisted in sudden agony, the terrified eyes grew forlorn, unutterably lonely, and slowly, slowly emptied until they had gone

blind as stone. The thick stream of blood filled the swirling pits, blotted out the white blank walls, the preoccupied figures bending over the table, the lost child's face. Staring straight into the darkness of this red tide she knew vaguely, in a flash of insight come and gone, and lost on the instant, the meaning of her dream.

Waves of perspiration started deep within her body to push small fountains through the pores of her skin. She had to get help, somehow she had to escape the invisible bonds of force that held her there, she must move . . . move. And struggling, she woke.

She sat up with a cry trembling on her lips and dazedly looked around her. The blazing sun was on all sides, her body was bathed in sweat and bands of heat throbbed around her temples. The little group of aspen, in whose shade she had spread her blanket a few hours before, had completely withdrawn protection from the sun. For several moments she sat with trembling hands clasped around her knees, the sense of her nightmare lingering as an undefined dread, an obscure fear and feeling of inadequacy. What did it mean? She was not sure; she felt she knew somehow, that some secret corner of her brain comprehended well enough while the rest understood only vaguely.

Oh what does it matter! she thought, impatient with her own perplexity and with the persisting sense of dismay. It's only a nightmare after all! She shrugged her shoulders, hating the tug of damp fabric across her hot flesh, and sighing, she rose to move her blanket back once more into shadow. Again she collapsed face down upon it.

The shimmering field was oppressively still, the windless air hot and muggy and the light leaves above her head unmoved by the faintest trace of wind. In desperation she tried to recapture sleep but the more she tried the more it seemed to elude her, and so she lay possessed still by the fragments of nightmare. Restlessly, she turned over on her back, shading her eyes with one bent arm. The tall grass molded an oasis of green and framed the lazy clouds drifting serenely across the hot white sky, calm clouds stately with the dignity of the lonely and untouchable. Oh to be a cloud upon a summer's day! No need then to drown in nightmares and blood, no need to be touched by pity or distress, no need to care for anyone, or anything.

A green bug crawled slowly and with great care up a broad blade of grass near her face. She watched him drag his ponderous body higher and higher while the grass dipped beneath his

weight, dancing and shivering as if it were his dancing partner.

Well, then, a beetle, a beetle on a leaf, to be a peaceful beetle in a world so small and yet so great that only a leaf could matter, or a blade of grass. A beetle on a stalk, a cloud in the summer sky, anything, anyone . . . ah, but I've got to sleep, I've got to!

She turned back upon her stomach and pillowed her head in her arms to shut out the glare of the sun. She could hear and feel each minute tick itself past. It was no use! With a moan she sat up again and wiped her face in exasperation. Furiously she stared out across the bright field. Nothing moved. Even the crickets' chirrup was stilled and no birds sang. Beyond the hedge, a deathlike silence reigned over the hospital field and further, on the road, no traffic moved to break the glittering stillness. The sun filtered down through the slender trees making a patchwork pattern of gold and shadow at her feet. She sat silently staring at it with heavy burning eyes and her mind took up and spread before her in photographic detail the events of the week.

Where had she gone, that crazed woman weeping into the dead child's face? Was she still out there somewhere wandering around clutching the now decomposed little body? The worst though . . . the worst had been the girl, a child really, not more than thirteen. A weightless burden brought in by the MPs, her long black hair clotted with blood, her narrow jaw shattered, one eye crushed in its socket, the skull fractured, and none of it done by bombs or shells or mines but only by an ancient lust.

"Raped," the MP officer had said laconically. "Three GIs, ours, not niggers. They shot her father, shot her kid brother. Used their carbines on her. Nice, huh? White men at that. I damn well don't *compris* it!"

A man with a heart would have shot a dog in that condition, wouldn't he? No one could care for her alive, no one cared for her dead so it hadn't mattered. She hadn't been anything more than a battered, bleeding lump of thrice ravaged adolescent flesh and she was dead now and over there with the others in the raw new graves as yet unmarked by iron crosses and tin garlands.

Irritation swept Lee now, a wild irrational anger at the dead girl's face returned in agonized terror, at the face of the crazed mother bent above the still child, and the host of others parading her weary mind.

"Christ, I don't care!" she cried furiously. "I don't care, do

you hear! I've got to sleep. Oh damn you! Damn you!" She beat her fists against the dusty earth in impotent rage, trying to empty her mind of faces, cries, eyes that pleaded mutely, hopelessly to her alone. "Damn you! Oh damn you!"

There was no ridding herself of them. She could curse their souls and curse their shades but she knew that they were with her to stay. Years later she would be lucky not to have them throng in upon her with their dank morbid breath of the grave, and worse, with all the senseless brutality and loss for which they stood, all the wasted years, the agony and pain that meant nothing. Death! That was what they represented. Death! Death come to loom over these hot, sun-filled days, the sweat-wrung nights; death fallen in step beside her, a dark indefinable shadow that clung even as its own sickening perfume clung. It was everywhere, lying at random through the green fields, sprawled under the flowering hedges, lying covered with dust and rubble in the narrow streets; everywhere bared to the summer sun and the passing eye of man and yet, moving as a shadow, in step with her own.

It was everywhere, this death. Even as Lee crouched in the meager shade of the aspen, it proved impossible for her to escape from the nightmare faces that seemed compelled to spew forth death in her mad dreams, to rob her of sleep.

"Goddam it," she cried to the silent field glittering unmercifully away from her shade. The heat of the summer noon seethed and shimmered over the parched grass. Still nothing moved. She was miserably aware of her sticky body as she lowered her face to her knees, unable to bear the sight of the cruelly blistered day.

As she sat there a sense of unreality lingered. Why had her dream taken her back to Denver? Whom had she seen? Somewhere a dark world had opened its doors; she had caught a glimpse of something vital, something beyond comprehension, before the doors had slammed and she was thrown back again into the day. She screwed her eyes closed tight and hugged her knees, pressing her face hard into the damp sleeves of her fatigues, shivered, and drove the shadow away.

CHAPTER 8

A faint light shone above the fields, caught by a thin low overcast that lay between earth and sun in a ghostly shrouding of trees and hedges, while streamers of mist hung motionless in the chill air. The peaked hospital tents, like small islands, poked through the vapor. Plumes and wreaths of mist clung to their poles as clouds to mountain peaks. Somewhere among the tents, a disconsolate cow stood knee-deep in the wet grass and lowed mournfully. Once a meadow lark whirred upward and broke into song only to lapse into silence again as if dampened by the morning not yet fully born. Reverberations of distant artillery rolled among the low hills, waxing and waning on a dying wind. Occasional convoys passed the field, and the voices of men in cabs or in open trucks echoed a moment strangely clear and disembodied. In all a general peace reigned among the dripping tents, a breathless hush that was simply great weariness.

"Jesus! but I'm getting old!" Effie Newcomer exclaimed, yawning, and tenderly felt the calves of her huge legs. She sat on a cot in the back of the tent congested with the litter of duffle bags, cots and bed rolls. Messkits, fastened by a length of string, hung above each cot. They shone like silver in the gloom as they slowly revolved with the motion of wind-touched canvas. A small tin lantern hung from the tent's center pole and whenever it lurched the lantern tinkled musically.

"Charley horse?" Paula Avers asked sympathetically; her flat drawl softened by fatigue.

"Yeah," her chief growled and continued to rub gently at her legs. Yeah, Charley horse, varicose veins, flat feet! she thought morosely. I'm old all right. These kids probably wonder why in hell I'm still around. With sudden bleakness she thought of her married sisters in and around Philadelphia, her two married brothers in New Jersey, one of them on the potato farm at Vineland where they'd all been raised somewhat like a litter of mongrel pups. She thought of their children, the numerous nieces and nephews of whom she'd long ago lost

track. She saw herself among them: old and fat, unmarried and alone. Aunt Effie . . . for Sunday dinners and family reunions; poor old Aunt Effie for an occasional weekend; perhaps, now and again, for a conscience-stricken Christmas. For a moment impotent anger swelled within her. Hell, what if she was old and alone, they needn't think they had to pity her; she'd been around; she could still nurse; she'd be damned if she'd ever accept favors. . . . They could take that poor old Aunt Eff business and stuff it! Then as quickly as her anger had risen, it collapsed and she sat on massaging her legs, too weary to think or care about the future.

Across from her Paula lay back with a sigh and fluffed out her dark hair. She heard an ambulance turn quietly into the field, and then stop. She shivered forlornly. God, I'm sick of this! she thought. In six hours I'll be back in that damned Shock Ward for another twelve hours of duty if I'm lucky to get off that easy. At the thought, the muscles of her own legs ached dully. If only she'd get sick or something! Pneumonia, anything! They'd transfer her to duty in England, in a general hospital somewhere, and she'd go back to living and working in buildings instead of these hot tents, and wearing white or seersucker uniforms instead of these damned fatigues. There'd be PXs and officers clubs and a good messhall. Ah, she sighed, how nice! Yet, here she was and here she knew she would stay.

Anyway, there was Guy to think of, there was Guy out there somewhere in front of them with his company. At least here she'd see him now and then, but if she was sent back to England—Guy . . . oh Guy, she thought, and her heart said a silent prayer for him. Mrs. Guy Madison returned from overseas. Mrs. Guy Madison, the former Paula Avers, graduate of St. Thomas, married in Paris. The bride wore . . . but what would she wear? Class A uniform? Oh no! her heart protested, seeing herself a little plump and dowdy in the green blouse and pink skirt and that awful o.d. shirt and tie. Oh no, not that! She wouldn't marry if she had to marry in uniform! She'd go back to Kansas and marry George Arnold, darned if she wouldn't! Funny, she thought, I've forgotten all about George. Why not . . . after Guy.

She sighed and yawned and glanced sleepily around the dim tent. Across from her, near the open tent flap, Lee Caine sat on the edge of her cot, writing.

"Tired, Lee?" Paula asked, noting the sag of the younger

girl's shoulders. She propped herself on one elbow . . . there was something she had meant to ask her . . . oh yes. "Did you get your letter, honey?"

"Letter?" Lee raised her head, startled.

"Yes. Major Collier had it. Willie MacDonald handed it to him at breakfast to give you. I said I'd take it but he said he was going to wait around until you came anyway. I thought you got it. When I left he was talking to you. Didn't he give it to you?"

"No, he didn't. I guess he forgot," Lee replied slowly, too exhausted to think. A letter! From Bob probably . . . oh yes from Bob.

"That's funny. It's the first mail that's come in. You'd think he'd remember." Paula looked puzzled.

"Remember what?" Effie broke in.

"A letter. Lee got a letter."

"Did, huh?"

"Yes. Funny, though, Major Collier should forget." Paula insisted.

"Oh it doesn't matter, Paula." Lee interrupted impatiently. "I'll go get it."

"Get what? The letter? I thought you had it?" Effie's ears had visibly pricked at the mention of Collier's name.

"Say, what day is it?" Sally Hawks asked suddenly. "You know, I think maybe it's my birthday."

Effie was distracted. "Day?" she cried, knitting her heavy brows. "Day? Bless me if I know. It's somewhere damn close to being July, ain't it?"

"Did you want to celebrate, Sal?"

"God no! Just wondering."

What day? Lee thought. What month? for that matter. Was it still June? Surely it was. The thought of its still being June was somehow reassuring as though she held time still within her grasp. How many days had they been in this field? She didn't know. Three, four, five. Yes, but the letter. . . . Wearily she rose.

"Didn't somebody mention a dance or something on the Fourth at Corps Headquarters?" June Harley asked wistfully. In imagination she saw herself dressed in Class A and surrounded by attentive officers so pleased at being able to see and talk with an American girl. It had never occurred to her that these foreign women were anything but repulsive to

her compatriots and she was convinced that, in contrast, she possessed all the better attributes of Hollywood.

"You mean you wanna go and be pawed by a bunch of major and colonel fatheads, chairborne and potty and full of hot air!" Sally asked, squirming in desperation to reach an itch in the middle of her broad back.

"Well, I . . . no . . ." But she did! She wanted desperately to be pawed, to be tempted, to be anything! June was a virgin; men frightened her, yet she chased after them frantically, wanting in a desperation that bordered on the frenetic the safety and social prestige of marriage. She was terribly afraid of two small words: old maid; far more afraid of them, even, than of the single word, sex, and because of these words she hated the sight of her own narrow face in the mirror, the sound of her own flat frightened voice, the feel of her stiff body. How she envied Sal her big breasts and large graceful body, even her coarse unaffected humor! How she especially envied her for her easy natural way of flirting and laughing with the men. She supposed it was because Sally came from the South and Southern women seemed to have an instinctive knowledge of how to please men. Second nature to them, she thought wistfully.

By her own cot Lee fumbled among her belongings and came up with a comb. She ran it through the short tangle of her hair, and searching out a lipstick went to the small metal mirror nailed to the tent pole to apply it. She peered with difficulty into the distorting tin and sighed, pulling at the one white lock over her forehead that was sunburned out of all harmony with the rest. She lingered there, unable to hurry, unable even to care very much though she knew the letter was from Bob for there was no one else. Her uncle was dead a year; his wife had written only to ask for money, payment, she said, for their investment in her education. But now that she had remarried, she no longer wrote. Yes, the letter would be Bob's.

Bob, she thought, staring at her own image, trying to invoke memory of his. Bob! and was rewarded as a sudden gust of desire shook her body, rising from nowhere to fill her with longing and exquisite sadness. It was almost as if his face had appeared in reflection at her shoulder, almost as though his hand had touched her body. She turned abruptly and started from the tent.

"Where you going?" Effie demanded.

"To get my letter," she muttered and ducked beneath the flap.

"Hey, wait. Oh hell, it can wait! You'd better . . . hey, Lee . . ." but the younger nurse was gone, and the chief sank back into her sleeping bag muttering. After a moment she asked aloud, "Anybody figure out what day it is?" and was answered by silence and the even breathing of the sleeping. Aw hell, who cares what day it is! What's time anyway! She, too, closed her eyes and was shortly snoring.

The day held meaning elsewhere though, for it was the twenty-seventh of June and to the north the great French seaport of Cherbourg was surrendered by its German garrison to elements of the American First Army. Such news, when it finally reached the platoon, was happily received, but with a certain listlessness, as though it really had no meaning for them. This life could have no end, no change.

June passed; July moved in, relentless and sure. The days followed each other through clouds of dust and heat, through sheets of fine summer rain that turned the dust to mud and the heat to chill mists; then the sun would once more conquer.

After the hill-ringed town of La Haye-du-Puits was beaten to rubble, the Germans withdrew, retreating swiftly through Lessay and Périers, down the shoulder of the peninsula toward Coutances.

Death was everywhere in Normandy, heat and sun and death and, with them, history. Even the French sensed history as they waited patiently on the edge of battle or, sometimes, gun in hand, sniped from behind the hedges at one side or the other. For the most part, they waited for the time, win, lose or draw, when the armies would pass on and allow them to return once more to their land and the tilling of their soil. It was obvious that they could not make up their collective mind as to the joys or sorrows of liberation, for at times they welcomed the Americans with hysterical glee but, quite as often, only stared in sullen resentment, their smoking homes at their backs.

The sense of history was strongest now among the Allies. They had tasted victory, albeit at a cost, and they began to look forward more confidently to the future. In the first week of this crucial month the much-vaunted Third Army began its landings on the beach, and within two weeks much of its armor and infantry divisions had moved into place beside

the weary depleted First Army. Each day found fresh troops landing to move forward on the crowded roads, huge convoys of equipment and supplies moving up into the lines. Yet, in spite of growing confidence and strength the Allies could not help the shadow of foreboding that mingled with their triumph as they forced the Germans back step by step toward the undefendable mainland of France.

Before Coutances, artillery hammered steadily in the glaring sun; before Saint-Lô infantrymen moved stealthily forward, worming their way up the sunny hills, inching their way through the myriad horror-filled hedgerows, while far to the east the British-American junction near Caen held firm through days and nights of fruitless patrols and skirmishes, attacks and counter-attacks, ground gained and lost. Behind these fronts the roads were clogged with troops and vehicles as the Germans, with what was left of their air force, made abortive attempts to slow this amassing power, while the Americans retaliated by chewing at their retreating columns. Fighters and light bombers roared over the countryside at low altitudes by day to bomb and strafe anything that moved, and by night, circled and circled, dropping their bombs at random wherever a troop or material concentration was reported.

All the while the weather held hot and dry, clear, glaring days as if earth and space were held transfixed and waiting for the outcome of battle. The sky swung brilliantly blue with summer's heat above an earth that smothered in its own dust. The hot winds carried the stench of burning towns and rotting flesh as far as the beaches where the gray and sullen Channel heaved. Beyond it the world waited impatiently for the news of combat, for boasts of the numbers of killed or captured, the inches taken and held, the yards lost, retaken and passed by, those miles of alien land that meant nothing but heat and dust and suffering, a dreary strange soil enriched by the sweat of one people and soiled by the blood of many.

To Lee, bending with aching back and tired throbbing legs over the narrow surgical table with the hot lights shining on her young, sweat-streaked face, those days and nights of early July continued as an uninterrupted nightmare, an agony of time. Though she did not realize it, she was being brought to the verge of emotional bankruptcy.

"Don't look at them closely!" Collier had warned her more than once. "Don't really see them for if you do, you're lost!

Be blind, be dumb, be deaf! Believe me, it's the only salvation."

At first she hadn't understood. Be blind, deaf? How? And why, for God's sake? It wasn't possible!

She was seized by sudden pity or wrung by loneliness and despair when a man died on their table or the lights revealed hopeless mutilation or when vacant windows of a ruined house leaned above their way. For hours she would be lost in the depths of recrimination and of guilt. Her compassion for the smelly dead was like pain itself, her pity for the French beside their battered homes, and for the still small hands of children in the dust, was violent with the knowledge of guilt. Before the constant stream of mangled bodies through their Surgery, before the sodden carcasses of men and animals rotting in the sun, before the empty ruined towns, she was filled with loathing, and a sick despair. That death should come so violently without dignity or glory! That men should bring all this upon themselves! For weeks she was caught up in an ambivalence of feeling; of hatred for her own who destroyed, who killed and looted and were not always merciful; and of compassion for their suffering, the inevitableness of their being there.

The sight of weary riflemen walking through the dust, of dog-tired men sitting beside the roads, their red-rimmed eyes staring vacantly at nothing, left her shaken and forlorn. She wanted, oh how she wanted, the godlike grace to touch this drooping shoulder or that and pronounce him saved. Or, failing this, to have the power to give some small measure of comfort for their fear. Yet, my God, how do you comfort the young and the strong who face their own abrupt end, who see their grip slipping from the edge of life while the years stretch away to tantalise with hope. They cannot die easily, the young. No human grace could make it any easier and knowing this, Lee felt a despair she had never known existed.

In the end she began to understand what Collier meant when he recommended blindness though she recognized it as futile talk. He drove himself mercilessly, as he drove them all, in the effort to drown out the clamor of his nerve-naked conscience that seemed born of his race, and the intense emotional turmoil that it had brought him, and born, too, of the almost morbid sensitivity of his own nature. He cared. He cared far too much. He drove himself and all of them in this charnelhouse, to attain relative security against sight and pity and despair. Through the exhaustion of his body he found

a measure of atonement for the thrust of relentless guilt. He worked until he could not think, and in the absence of thought he was partially safe. There was an actual satisfaction for him in an aching weary body, almost a glory in hands that trembled with fatigue, in legs so hollow and shaken that he could barely stand. Work and forget it all as far as humanly possible! Gradually, Lee came to follow this advice herself. It was absolutely necessary to erect a barrier against reality.

The middle of July found the First Platoon in a field a few miles west of Saint-Lô. The tents were pitched along a gently rolling ridge from which one could look out across a shallow valley to a low range of further hills that surrounded the still uncaptured town.

"The *kraut* bastards, they hang on to every goddam hedge like it was their last position on earth! They got dugouts like in the first war and you got to get 'em out with steel! We got tanks, we got artillery pounding the living hell outta 'em, and we got planes that damn near leveled everything standing but they're in there still, ain't they? We got into the edge of town; we was running around in the streets but so was they. They won't get out. Stubborn, them *krauts,* and smart!"

A battery of 155's placed their guns on the brow of the hill above the hospital, and when they fired, the canvas walls blew in and out with the rush of air, tent poles shook and ropes snapped as though in a high wind. Bending at their work, the medical personnel felt concussion slap against their skin and the roar filled their ears, tightening nerves already taut to the breaking point.

During the day they could stand on the sunny hillside and watch shells explode on the further ridge; they could see plumes of smoke rising from the unseen town, and several times when the Mustangs came over, they were able to watch the planes dive-bomb the area. The planes would come roaring over low above their field, lazily circle the enemy lines, then plunge forward as though in sudden decision, their engines whining faintly in the vacant glittering sky, fusilages like swift arrows of silver in the sun. When almost to earth they would nose up suddenly, their bombs away, and then whirl swiftly to skim home, strafing as they went. From the hospital field the watchers could see the mushrooming explosions and feel the earth vibrate faintly beneath their feet.

"Front row, balcony, none better!" Major Collier said grimly.

As the days dragged by, the hospital people worked doggedly on the hundreds of wounded evacuated from these fields they could see so clearly. Night came and day again, and night, and they reckoned time only by the number of patients crossing their tables. They were obscurely aware of the weather and flies, the guns on the hill, the planes and the long strained hours with time out for coffee to keep them awake and time out for food to keep them on their feet and time out for sleep only when they could not go one one hour more. Dully, in a perpetual cloud of fatigue, they moved vaguely through time and the senseless nightmare surrounding them, like stunned men.

The only sparks to penetrate the murk of their exhaustion were the rumors:

Saint-Lô had fallen! Saint-Lô was being by-passed. The Yanks were already halfway to Paris. The *krauts* had counter-attacked during the night; our men were even now retreating up the valley! The French had risen! Resistance forces were fighting everywhere behind the enemy lines, attacking them from the rear.

But the brutal truth was all too clear as the casualties continued to flow into Receiving with their conflicting stories. They spoke of concentrated mine fields, of heavy *kraut* artillery, of snipers, both French and German, of well-dug-in enemy positions, of their own companies decimated beyond belief in a single attack.

Then it rained one night, rained hard, streaking sideways across the sloping fields, pounding bullet-like against the canvas and churning the accumulated dust of weeks into slimy mud. Lee came stumbling through it, overtaken by the ever-constant dysentery.

Struggling blindly in the curtain of rain she heard other boots slip and gurgle, a voice cried, "Hey!", a hand touched her shoulder and at that same instant antiaircraft guns placed at intervals along the road opened up with an abrupt explosive crackling. Startled, she raised her head just as a roaring shadow swept out of the windy night to hurtle low over the tents. Bright tongues of flame streaked the sky, sparks from invisible motors flared and whipped away.

The hand from the darkness tightened, pulling her forward as the great extended wings blotted out vision and she fell face downward in the mud. She held her breath; then heard the

ripping crash of metal, an earth-shaking explosion as the plane plowed into the hilltop a hundred or so yards behind her.

Dazed, she pushed herself to her knees and saw the fierce bright flames leap upward from the dark rim of the hill. The garish light lit up the rain-swept slope, outlined the wet tent peaks, the litters stuck upright in the mud, the ambulances sleek and shining parked before Receiving, the blurred white features of her companion also on his knees.

He whistled softly. "Damn close!"

Men were dashing from the tents, shouting backward as they ran, their voices high and hoarse with excitement. They rushed across the windy field, tripping, falling, cursing and their exultant running figures were weirdly outlined by the wind-fanned flames. As if in some tribal dance of victory, a half-mad primitive orgy of triumph, they leaped and ran bent forward and, half blinded by heat and glare, circled the fire, searching the ground.

She got shakily to her feet, wiping at the mud on her face.

"Thanks," she said to the man beside her without taking her eyes from the hellish scene on the hilltop.

"Hey!" he exclaimed, "A nurse?"

"Yes."

The sharp report of exploding ammunition flared over the crackling of the burning plane and they both watched as a burst of tracers rose in a brief arc from the flames. Acrid smoke drifted down to them and Lee could feel the brush of heat against her cheek. Yet, even as they watched, the fire began to die down, the black dancing figures grew indistinct and the wet tents melted once more into the night.

"Maybe you can help me, nurse. I'm lost," he said, touching her arm.

"Are you a patient?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Where? If you mean in what ward I don't rightly know but if you can get me back to the Receiving Tent I can find my bed and board all right."

"Hang onto my belt," she directed, thinking that somewhere in that mess up there on the hill there'd been a man, a German. She gave one last glance at the glow of red embers before she moved off in the general direction of the tents. Flashing tongues of distant artillery licked the hillside. She saw the big Receiving Tent looming ahead even as the sound hit them suddenly, the

dull articulate pulse of war thrown outward by the rise of earth to vibrate hollowly down the shallow valley. Then they were among the ambulances, the soft murmur of their engines all around them. Lee's hand was on the blackout flap when suddenly behind them on the hill men's voices proclaimed discovery, crying it hoarsely on the wind.

They had found him, she thought, whoever he was, whatever thing of horror he had now become; they had found him there on the hill scattered by the burnt wreckage of his plane, a very small and blackened thing divorced from the thundering power of his machine and the sharp deadly beat of his guns, a thing of revulsion to be feared no longer by men of the ground, a disgusting thing to be buried quickly and forgotten.

"Goddam!" her companion tripped heavily and fell against the tent. "Pardon me . . . but . . ."

"Watch the ropes," she cautioned absently and ducked inside the tent flap.

Receiving was full but quiet. In the murky glow she could make out the rows of blanket-covered litters, the gray-white faces and bloodied bandages. The air was close and foul and, after the damp freshness of the night, the contrast made her gag. Receiving was always wreathed in smoke for smoking made the waiting bearable. Here men talked in low voices when they could; they talked endlessly of the battles fought, of other men, unlucky, who were dead, of comrades already come this way.

Those who were not badly hurt were buoyant with relief from combat even though it might not be more than a week, a month, and if they were very fortunate, three months. They could talk about their pain almost happily, they could remember fairly well the way it had happened and what had hit them, what sort of bastard trick the *krauts* had pulled on that hill, what son-of-a-bitch eighty-eight got a piece of steel in their bodies, what damn lieutenant was the cause of it all. And because they knew their luck they watched over those who hadn't had any part of it, and they shook their heads in a kind of wonder mixed with fear.

In low tones they discussed the poor devil in the corner who moaned on and on in a toneless cry, or the one, two litters away, with half his face shot off. They jerked swift eyebrows at the man half supported on his elbows, open mouth shrieking a noiseless cry of agony . . . no legs, that one. Christ, no legs! Damned if I'd want to live! Hell, don't look like he will. And their whispers, frightened, followed the man being carried away

by the bearers . . . no more women for that one! Poor damn bastard, no more women and his guts coming through! God, I *would* rather be dead!

Those who could not speak—and there were many—lay with gray, drained faces thrown back, their tongues swollen and coated with vomit, their hearts pounding in chests that struggled to draw air while cold sweat formed like a clammy cloak around their mangled bodies. They lay inert on their stretchers with life pulling away from them slowly, with consciousness dimming. In sick misery, in sicker fear, they waited for the help that murmured and passed and bent above them.

"My God!"

Lee turned to find her companion staring around the tent in grim wonder. A large bandage was around his head, covering one eye.

"You were in here once, weren't you?" she asked, wondering at his surprise.

He laughed. "Not that I remember. You work here?"

"No, Surgery. What were you doing wandering around out there?"

"I know. I'm AWOL. I was out saying good-by to a buddy who brought me some clothes and some cigarettes. I got lost. Lucky you found me." His one good eye shone a bright pleased blue as he cocked his head at her to peer up under the edge of the gauze. She had to smile.

"Okay. I'll show you home if you can wait one minute." She picked her way among the litters, beckoning for him to follow.

"Hey buddy, roll over just a little. Gotta get these goddam grenades outta your pocket! Okay. Wanna drink?"

"No," the badly mangled staff sergeant whispered. "Want my pistol. Don't let anyone get it. Killed a damn *kraut* for it. P-38 . . . want it."

"Sure . . . sure." The corpsman fumbled at the knotted bundle of cloth by the sergeant's feet and produced the German gun.

"Sure, here it is," he said cheerfully. "I'll stick it by your head. The doc'll be along in a minute. You hang on to it, huh?" All the while he was thinking of how he could probably pry it loose from this purple-heart character in X-ray. By the time they got done shoving him around in there chances were he'd be out cold. Sure, nothing to it, if the S.O.B. McAllister didn't cop it first!

He rose and bumped into Lee. And as he passed on to the next litter, muttered to her, "God, but it's hot in here, ain't it?"

She nodded and turned to find her companion staring soberly down at the man on the litter.

"My division," he said, indicating the patch on the torn sleeve.

"They all are, almost all anyway. We're medical support for your division you know. We get everything from your Collecting Company. Look, you go wait there by that flap and I'll be with you in one second. I've got to check at the desk."

"Okay."

Outside the Receiving Tent a corpsman was bent over a wounded German. "You bastard! I hope to hell you understand English, you goddam square head! Gimme that watch! Come on, come on. Gimme that watch. Okay, you stinking son-of-a-bitch. Raise a hand to me and I'll kill you, you Nazi bastard! Don'tcha *nichts verstehe* me. You *verstehe* plenty! *Ja, ja.*"

He wrapped the watch carefully in his handkerchief, stuffed it into his rear pants pocket and was just turning away with a pleased grin widening across his face when Lee came up to the lighted desk. "Anything special before I go on to Surgery?" she asked Samson curtly.

"Yeah. A *kraut,*" he replied morosely, rising.

The corpsman came up to dump three grenades indifferently among the pistols, ammunition, tags and slips, and odds and ends collected from the pockets of the wounded. Lee noted a separate stack with a billfold lying open on top. A girl's picture smiled serenely through the cracked isinglass window; her young face was stained with dried blood. Absently, she poked a finger through the pile, a muddied penknife, a broken wrist watch, a few German medals, a prophylactic kit, unopened, and several soiled letters, all small things, useless, valueless. Things she knew, without asking, belonged to the dead. There was, she felt, something infinitely pitiful about these small collections so carefully listed, methodically cleaned, stuffed into small white bags, tagged, and someday sent on their way to what had once been their owner's home. What heartbreaking valueless symbols of the man who didn't return, she thought, and what small comfort that these were all he owned at the end.

"Over there." Samson jerked a thumb indifferently toward a dark corner beneath the sloping canvas. Two litters lay side by side, and beneath the carelessly drawn blankets, two rigid forms, the feet turned outward in the last symbolic gesture of

relaxing muscles. "Femoral artery, one; head half shot off, t'other. Both of 'em Dead-on-Arrival and no damned wonder!" The sergeant shoved the useless scrap into a tagged bag and tossed it over the desk into a cardboard ration box half filled with similar bags.

"Where's the German?"

"Over here. I'm telling you he's a beaut!" Sergeant Samson led her back to a litter near the Dead-on-Arrivals and bent to pull away a dirt-encrusted blanket, ignoring the man's frantic hands that clutched to draw it back up to his filthy stubbled chin.

"Quit that, Superman!" the sergeant snarled. "Phew!" he held his nose and made a wry face as a nauseating smell rose from the litter.

The German soldier lay on his side, knees drawn up to his chest. Except for a dirty olive-green *Wehrmacht* jacket he was naked. A huge pressure bandage covered the whole of his right buttock. Lee knelt, and trying not to breathe, pried with her fingertip at the gauze. It was bloodsoaked and ironhard with the dried seepages of the wound. A sickening sweetish sticky odor, quite different from the smell of human filth and old blood, rose from the festering mass.

"Ugh!" she cried involuntarily and rocked back on her heels.

The German stared at her with feverish, indifferent eyes, sick eyes that were hollow in the dirty gray of his face framed by long matted yellow hair that fell untidily over his forehead. He seemed young, not much more than eighteen, she thought, and it was evident that he must have been lying out in the fields for several days. His body was emaciated, his eyes scum-filled, and dried vomit clung to his chest like a scab.

"He's sure a beaut, ain't he?" Samson queried with an air of satisfaction.

She rose, dusting off her knees, her eyes still on the German. "Yes, and it's a good thing you noticed him. Send him right on into the gangrene tent, please."

His face lit up, shedding sullenness like a cloak. "Okay. I will right away, Lieutenant. This sure has been a rough week, hasn't it? It's so damn hot and this . . . uh . . . damn dysentery is enough to get a man down. But you sure got it rough in there. I don't see how you all stand that heat!"

She smiled and left him then. Guess that little breach is healed, she thought, and wondered why it made her so uneasy to know someone disliked her, even a man like Samson whom

she could never hope to respect. I don't exactly have to live on praise, she mused, but I know I can't live with hate.

"Don't go away and leave me!"

"Oh!" Startled, she turned to find the blue-eyed wounded soldier at her heels. "Why I forgot all about you! Here. Your ward is right over there." She took his arm and turned him into the central square. "Watch that litter! There's a bottle of blood tied up there. . . ."

He sidestepped and paused before the connecting blackout flap to the Post-operative ward. "Thanks . . . uh . . ." his one unbandaged eye went to her throat, noted the gold insignia on her collar, "Thanks, Lieutenant . . . ah . . ." and he grinned, waiting.

"Caine. It's Lee Caine," she replied, and couldn't help laughing for he looked very odd with his one intense blue eye and the bandage cocked like a hat awry on his head. "I think I ought to be thanking you. Perhaps you saved my life," and involuntarily she glanced down at the mud caked on her coveralls.

"Well . . . it was probably a mile above us at that. Sorry . . ." His eye followed her glance and he looked his discomfort.

"Don't be, please. I didn't mean to complain. Well, good luck." And she turned away to duck into the anteroom of the surgical tent. She smiled to herself and felt almost cheerful. He might really have saved her life at that!

Her thoughts turned again to the men shouting on the hill. Someone would turn up with a souvenir tomorrow, a hand or a finger or a piece of charred bone. Someone always did. Like the boyish corporal who worked in the mess tent and the thumb and forefinger he'd picked up somehow, somewhere and had exhibited so proudly. "A good *kraut!*" he'd said of the grisly remains. It had pleased him immensely to have the nurses react.

"Bring us a case?" Collier asked, donning his mask.

"Yes, sir. That is I think I have if you want to work on him now. He's a German . . . gangrene and I thought I'd better get him out of Receiving in any case. They're taking him to the gas tent."

"Gangrene? Got anything that shouldn't wait?"

She shook her head slowly.

"All right, the German is our man. Don't look like that. I'm not going to blow my stack! I told you, things being equal, we'll take the *krauts* as they come. Of course, when it comes

to two major cases, we take our own first; there's no question about that. Well, come on . . ."

She followed him out to the small gas tent set slightly apart from the Surgical tent. She was obscurely relieved though she had not really expected his anger, for he'd made this point clear to her from the very first: they would take badly wounded Germans before their own men if their own could wait. Still, she had become so much more aware of the general odor of hatred that the decision had brought her a touch of unease. There was a great deal of talk now that the medics had no right to save the damned *krauts!*

On his part, when he thought about it at all, Collier knew the whole problem as an ethical matter; he thought of it in vague general concepts of the agony of man and of his oath as a doctor to do what he could regardless of the artificial barriers of race, nationality, religion or whatever. It was not that he was indifferent to what the Germans as a people had done to others, most specifically to the Jews; it was not that he did not feel an intense and frantic hatred for the mass brutality and death they had brought about in the name of super-race; it was only that he was wholly incapable of physical cruelty; he could not narrow hatred enough to condemn the single man.

"Hell!" he'd once said to Lee when they'd been more or less discussing the problem, "I'm no different in the way I feel about the Germans than you. I haven't practiced being a Jew since I was a kid and I'm only reminded that I'm considered to be a member of a separate race by the categorizing of the bigots. To me, it's simply a matter of religious conviction and as I am agnostic to the core I no longer bother about my proper niche, so to speak. Of course, there are those who feel called upon to remind me *where* they think I fit into the scheme of humanity, but that no longer concerns me greatly. I've been too busy."

And so, untroubled by any desire for revenge, he led the way to the gas tent and there used his skills as liberally as ever before to save the life of the young German. As she worked beside him, unsurprised by what others would have labeled either weakness or generosity, Lee forgot the plane, the dead pilot, the one-eyed lost patient.

CHAPTER 9

I'm homesick, Lee thought moodily. She paused just outside Surgery and stared across the twilight field. A crow cawed over a clump of trees beyond the kitchen tent and another answered from the woods across the road. Pots and pans rattled and banged, and behind her she could hear Collier talking to George in the otherwise empty tent as they worked on an improvisation for the lights.

"Goddam it, that won't work either! It's got to come over further, George." Collier's voice was tight with irritation.

Unheeding, she gazed into the gathering dusk. A vague sadness, attached to no definite cause, welled up out of weariness to leave her shaken and absorbed. Homesick? But for what? She hadn't had a home in years. Homesick for Denver? For the weather-beaten frame ranch house, small and dark and shabby in the valley's end, home of her uncertain childhood? For the two-room apartment she and Bob had shared three fleeting months? No, not for any of these, for she could remember Fort Dix far better, the sprawling BOQ with its tiny hot rooms, iron cots and chintz curtains. For Bob then? Perhaps. But I can't remember, I haven't the energy to recall or to care, she thought dismally.

"Hello. Busy?"

She jumped a little, startled by the nearness of the voice. She turned, puzzled by the strange yet familiar face so close to her own in the tent shadow. Then she remembered.

"Oh. Of course. I couldn't think, you look so different without all that gauze. . . ."

He grinned. "Yes. My vacation is almost over." A rueful note crept into his voice and his blue eyes shifted away from her face.

She nodded, too weary to think of anything to say, and for a moment they stood in silence in the growing dark. Finally, he blurted, "Are you busy? Could we go . . . well, somewhere, for a walk perhaps?"

"No."

His face fell, became boyishly sullen.

"I have to eat supper. You see, I work at night."

"Oh, well. Cigarette?" His face cleared instantly and he grinned again.

"It's not too dark?"

He glanced around. "No, not yet," and bent, shielding a match. Watching him Lee thought, how tall he is! She'd not noticed before his bigness, the breadth of his shoulders, the straight clean line of the back of his head and sun-browned neck. I should have recognized those blue eyes, she thought with an inward smile. Now that both were on view they were quite overpowering.

"You know," she said absently, "I don't even know your name."

"Oh. I figured you just weren't curious enough," he replied with a grin. "Now that you ask, Stainer, Bill Stainer, doughfoot."

Behind them the tent flap swayed and Collier ducked through followed by George. They almost ran into the two, now silent in the shadow of the tent.

"What? Waiting for me?" Collier asked, seeing her there.

"No . . . I . . ."

"Say, here's the very man I was telling you about!" George interrupted, clapping Stainer on the shoulder. "Lieutenant Stainer, isn't it?"

"Yes sir."

"This is the man who was buried alive for three minutes. Had a light case of concussion to show for it but the other man brought in with him had severe internal hemorrhages, abdomen and chest," George went on enthusiastically to Collier as if the two of them were consulting over the bed of a patient. "According to the lieutenant here they were crawling up a ditch and heavy mortar fire pinned them down and that's all he remembers. His tag furnished a few details about the cave-in of the ditchsides during the explosions and someone must have been close enough by to not only dig him out but note for how long he was buried. Damned sorry about the sergeant, Lieutenant." He turned to Stainer now, his voice grown less excited. There was silence.

"No good?" Collier asked George after a moment and the latter shook his head. "Never got out of Shock," he said.

"Oh . . . well, time to eat. Come on Lee, big backlog tonight."

"All right . . ."

"Wait, can I speak to you a second? Please?" Stainer asked anxiously.

She hesitated as Collier walked off with George. She saw the former half turn a few steps away, then go on.

"Look, I must go. I've only a few minutes. . . ."

"I know. Could I see you tomorrow sometime? Don't you have some time free?"

"What?" she asked.

"Don't you have any free time?"

With an effort she brought her attention back to him. "Free time? No, not really. Not these days." And she took a step in the direction of the two men walking off across the field.

"Couldn't I see you before you go on duty?"

Impatiently she shook her head and moved away. "I've got to hurry. We only have twenty minutes to eat as it is."

"I'm sorry." He fell into step beside her. "I just want like the dickens to see you again, to talk. . . ."

"All right." She had to get rid of him. Collier was looking back again and she could imagine his grin now. "All right," she repeated rather desperately, "meet me . . ." Where for God's sake? Not here, not where Collier could see and smile with that knowing grin. Not here . . . "Meet me beyond the hedgerow over there beyond those tents. There's a little stream, I usually sleep beside it under a bush, it's cooler. Meet me there about four in the afternoon, all right?"

"Yes. Swell!"

"Goodnight." Relieved, she hurried away, half-running to catch up.

"Christ, you don't *have* to eat!" Collier said to her sourly as she came up, panting a little.

"I smell rain," George put in tactfully, raising his face and sniffing at the heavy warm evening.

But it didn't rain. The night stayed hot and humid, and a thin sliver of a dying moon wheeled slowly on the horizon. The stars winked steadily from unshuttered skies.

In Receiving, the stream of wounded went on as if it would never end. Surgery steamed slowly through the heavy hours, the canvas closing in the heat and rancid odors of unwashed feet, vomit, and still warm blood and sweat. Lee's stomach sickened. She was already weak and queasy from lingering dysentery and this night brought her low. More than once she fled into the darkness behind the tent to retch miserably and to no avail, for she had eaten little in the last twenty-

four hours. Her body cramped with pain, her head whirled, aching and dizzy with nausea.

By morning she was too sick to care for anything, even coffee, and she crept off directly to the tent to get her blanket and to sleep stretched out on her aching stomach beneath the bush. The last thing she heard was a crow cawing again over the field and the harsh cry seemed somehow symbolic of her own somber mood.

She thought that she had slept less than an hour when she heard the voice.

"Hey, where are you?"

It came from a great distance, and to meet it, she rose slowly, slowly to the surface. She opened her eyes but they were so heavy that they closed again of their own weight.

"Where?" The eager voice spoke out of stillness again.

Drowsily, she raised her head, pushing at the damp hair tumbling over her forehead.

"Hey! Hey! Where are you?" the voice cried, almost upon her now and he appeared around the bush so suddenly he almost tripped over her. "Hi! I've scoured the whole damned field. There must be a hundred bushes. . . ."

"Hello," she muttered and sat up.

"Jesus, did I wake you?" Concern robbed his face of elation; he stood there staring dumbly.

"Well. . . ."

"God, I'm sorry. I'll go away if you want me to."

"No, please don't. I had to wake . . ." she broke off and glanced at her watch. Four fifteen! "Oh golly, it's late! You did me a favor. The way I was sleeping I'd have slept right through chow." Not that I'd care, she thought, but was pleased, nonetheless, to see the concern leave his face.

"Oh well then, if you're sure . . ." and he sat down in the grass beside her.

"Don't worry, it's fine. If you had a cigarette, now . . ." She rubbed her eyes like a child as he fumbled about in his pockets.

"Chesterfields!" he said happily, extending a battered pack. "How about that? I flipped lucky on the last issue."

"It sounds as if you were a pretty lucky man," she murmured.

"Yes," he replied soberly, "yes I was. I am. Luckier than Sergeant Alldice. It's funny about that. We were practically on top of each other in that ditch, he couldn't have been more than a foot or two away from me. I guess it was far enough.

Alldice was a good man, a damned good squad leader." He moved restlessly, flipping the lighter cover back with a snap. His gaze passed over her head, became absorbed in something beyond.

Something not of this quiet field, she thought looking into his unguarded face. His blue eyes were strained, wide, the dark pupils dilated in spite of the glaring light. She waited, aware of the stillness of the field, of crickets in the grass; she heard the soft flop of a water animal sliding into the tiny stream that meandered through the meadow.

I ought to say something, she thought. I ought to be able to pick the single word of comfort, for he is one of those from the dusty roads and I owe him an unpayable debt.

"It's strange how some men have luck and some don't!" he said suddenly. "It's stranger still that some of the best of them have the lousiest luck. We had a company commander in England, a funny little guy, bald on top, sloppy as the devil, just an ordinary sort of guy, ninety-nine percent civilian, as if he'd come straight from clerking in a shop or some office. He . . ." Stainer's eyes slid downward to re-focus on her face. "Am I boring you?" he asked gently.

"Oh no. Please tell me about your . . . about him."

"There isn't too much. He was so ordinary, so damned civilian that the big brass of the division used to get pretty disgusted with him. In fact, they had it all figured to make him PX officer or something but D-day came too soon and so he took his company on the beach. Funny thing, he turned out to be a hero, one of the real kind, no tin and citations, no nothing, but a hero just the same. He didn't seem to know what the hell it was to be afraid, though I know he was, he was too smart not to be. The rest of us, me too, we were puking and, well, wetting our pants with fear, and he acted like the whole thing was just another maneuver.

"In half an hour he and I were the only officers in the company still able to function and he made up for the rest of them and for me. He literally pushed us up the beach. He took us up under the cliffs, which was the only way we stood a chance, and then he re-grouped us and cajoled and threatened and cursed until we caught a little of that hero stuff and went up the cliff to knock out a couple of machine guns and disable a gun and he left us there to rest while he went back onto that beach to get our wounded off!

"So what happens? He saves a few of 'em and then he's hit

and hit bad. I don't know how badly, only one of the men who saw him says his leg was blown off, and so if he made it home he's in a wheelchair somewhere and nobody knows or cares what he did. They'll give him an ETO ribbon with one battle star and a Purple Heart for his very own but the brass never thought much of him and so he'll not get another damn thing. He wasn't military, he wasn't from the Point, he was too chummy with his men, too sloppy in uniform, and they wouldn't take my word for it, nor the word of the men, that he was some man that day. So there it is. There's only the little men who served with him, and a lot of them are dead or back in the hospitals, who know what kind of a guy he was under his bay window and bald head and small-town airs. We know he saved us from being maggot bait that day but nobody else knows. Nobody!" Stainer broke off, his eyes once more drifting past her to fix in the middle distance on nothing. For a second she had an eerie feeling that he had been talking to someone there beyond her.

"They'll give him a wooden leg and he'll walk around with his battle star. Christ, one battle star! They'll all say he had an easy war; they'll look at his couple of ribbons, his star, and be indignant as hell. How'd he get off so easily! Damned officer! He sits around home while our boys fight! Some war he fought! Funny thing, even the Purple Heart won't help. They give you one if you're scratched or if you're dead. Hell, Lee, why don't they keep their goddam medals! It makes me sick to see them hand them around, give 'em out by quotas and by rank. If there's a Silver Star left after Division gets done handing them around to its brass, then some colonel in Regiment naturally gets his crack at it and maybe there's one to go out to a single squad leader who's back there at Isigny wrapped up in a mattress cover! It makes me so goddam sick!" his voice dropped to a whisper.

Stifling an uncontrollable yawn, Lee thought of the time she had stood in the growing dusk of a small chapel far back within the shadows of Westminster where a German bomb had sliced open a bit of ancient wall and a grateful people had dedicated this strange monument of London's, and all England's, suffering to the RAF, "the few who gave so much for so many." The evening sky, she remembered, had been a crystal blue through the broken masonry and the faraway rumble of traffic had echoed faintly in the cathedral quiet. This had stirred her deeply. She'd felt the sincerity, the quiet grati-

tude, the depth of human devotion to the ideal of heroism, the concept that men will lose their lives for an intangible reward and a fleeting memory, a cause too complex and too inherent to require words.

And we, she thought, have our medals! Medals for the high in rank to order for each other, medals to be clasped beside the old-school tie, medals only rarely awarded to the dead whose sacrifice was presumably supreme and whose courage, six times out of ten, was never witnessed by the men who had the time to write the flowery dispatches or who could command the influence and the rank to bring an award down so low. Oh yes, medals, lots of medals, empty, unlovely medals prostituted into a mockery of reward for the courage that was a rifleman's daily necessity, yet for the dweller beyond the foxhole perimeter, this same courage, only occasionally required, brought decorations of low and high degrees. Medals bedecking the Army Staffs, the Corps Staffs, the Division Staffs, more rarely the Regimental and Battalion Staffs, and at Company level so widely scattered that many men hardly ever met the holder of a Silver Star.

Lee sighed. She knew all this, everyone knew it but even if you did know and did care there wasn't the energy left to be indignant. It took strength to rage and she had none.

"It was a sad day when we left England!" Stainer muttered, drawing deeply on his cigarette.

"England!" she said on a wave of nostalgia as sharp as physical pain. That's what she'd been homesick for then. Not for a home she could barely remember, not for the States tainted by whining and war profits, but for England that was, six or seven months ago, as alien a land as this.

"Did you ever get to London?" she asked but paid no attention to his answer for already her mind was turning backward, remembering with an incomprehensible longing. "There were flower carts in London," she said, and patrolling Bobbies keeping their eyes on the Piccadilly maids lounging in doorways and cellar entries, swinging the long-handled pocketbooks that were virtual symbols of their trade. "Aw, come'n Yank. Come'n. I'ave a place, honest I'ave."

Yes, there would be flower carts and flowers and the bright, bright green of grass in the parks and squares. The summer breeze would ruffle the Serpentine, would carry the brittle intonations of London's speech mingled with the muffled roar of traffic at Hyde Park Corner and the heavy perfume of lilacs

hanging in purple clusters by the ponds. Airmen in dusky blue stretched out beside their girls on sun-touched grass; khaki-clad Australians and New Zealanders with hats tipped over one ear striding in clusters along the Row; old people and children scattered through Green Park and the hard clapping of hundreds of heels striking pavement near Marble Arch. The Regiment, you know. Saw action first at Dunkirk. A terrible show! Ah, there it all was and how odd, odd not to be there still.

A month ago there had been the tight British humor, not quite understandable, and the spontaneous British courage, the courage of a people who had suffered wholesale, seen death closely, faced endless destruction and had accepted, not unafraid, but as one accepts who has, quite simply, no thought of yielding, no thought that only so much can be humanly borne.

They are much braver than we, she thought, and remembered with faint sadness the young Royal Air Force men strolling down the lovely lanes near Cirencester, tipping their caps to American nurses, begging their pardons for being so presumptious but, well, American girls, really one had so little chance, it was quite unique to be able to speak with American women. Ah, wouldn't one care for an ale? A stout? The pub was just a short way, and, oh yes, did they like England? Did they find it so awfully different? Were we chaps so difficult to understand? What makes you Yanks think us so frightfully stuffy? And in the lovely English spring there had been poppies in the fields of golden rye and ripening wheat; poppies nodding at the feet of black Angus cattle; poppies brilliant as new blood peering from the shadows of the hedges as the nights drew down the English lanes and the meadow lark's faint singing died away.

Yet, there was something else, an echo, a rising crescendo and the voices of England changed. Quiet still, and unruffled, tossing the words backward, "Air raid! Air raid! Go down quickly, go down to the shelter!" Out in the dark streets with the dying alarm, feet race along pavement, shrill whistles at corners sounding the way. Down to the shelter! Go down quickly! Out in the night searchlights probe the skies, cross aimlessly, weaving a net of their rays, for the hunt would be on and already, the faint distant throb of alien engines moving toward London, shadows in the suddenly threatening night; already the wild thunder of guns tear at the sky seeking the alien and foreign, bringing death in an English night; already the faint thud of a fallen bomb on the outskirts of the city.

In the damp of the shelter the mind often wanders, strays away from the night and its dangers only to return with a frightened lurch at the first dull shaking explosion and there is born in the brain an image of a huge engulfing blast, a great mass of rubble and plaster rising an instant to settle majestically; a whole building sliding, tearing, crushing, and the mind sees itself terribly vulnerable under the mass, sees itself mangled beyond human recognition beneath tons of debris.

"It's a shame you didn't get to London," she said, remembering herself in the shelters. She'd not been very brave, she'd always imagined far too much. With the rising turmoil of the guns she'd grown tense and waited, her mind holding her body rigid as beyond the damp weeping walls the city heaved and shook and somewhere close by, another explosion, a building erupting to mangle the flesh of someone who had not reached the door of safety. Time had ticked by with the muted voices, the undertone of hoarse breathing punctuated by dry coughs or the scratch of a match until it was over, the guns dying away in the distance leaving the silence to turn awesome, oppressive, while slowly, as if in a dream, bodies relaxed, breath grew less shallow and minds once more resumed the dreamy thread of night.

Rise stiffly, stretch the cramped body weary of sitting, yawn a little and wake to the terrible feeling of chill discomfort, the wonderful euphoria of fear abated. Footsteps would already be ringing on pavement, returning through the night.

There was, then, a point of return, she thought. Even though you groped through a blackout and the darkness held terror still there was a point of return while here . . . here . . .

"Yes. I wanted to see London. Well, someday . . . if I live long enough," he was saying.

"*If* you do," she replied, "*when* you do, and if it's spring, go down to Kew and see the gardens. They're very lovely."

"All right. If I live long enough," he repeated as though stunned. "I'm lucky though. Maybe I will."

But I can't help you, she thought in desperation. You're right . . . if you live long enough. I can't reassure you. She moved fretfully, wearily, half turning her back to him.

"It's a goddam stupid, rugged war, do you know?" he cried, his voice hoarse and bewildered while with shaking fingers he tore grass by the handfuls from the baked earth. "You don't know how it gets you, you can't know! My God, how they come up and die. Sixty replacements two weeks ago, brand

new green soldiers fresh from England and in four days there's fifteen of 'em left! Fifteen! And I'm the one, see, who told 'em . . . come on, men, follow me. I'm the one who took them into this hedge, up that damned draw, this Christ forsaken hill and I'm the one who left them there. They hadn't a chance and they knew it as well as I did and still I made 'em go. No, don't shake your head. It doesn't matter that the orders come down through channels and somebody else wants the hill or the hedge, that makes no difference because I take them out, I make them go . . ."

"But you can't. . . ."

He interrupted tersely, "No, they blame me and why shouldn't they? I keep coming back and anyway, who else can the poor devils blame? Come on, men, we're on attack! We're on point! If you live there'll be another goddam hill tomorrow, another goddam town! My God, sometimes I think . . ." he stopped, staring, his blue eyes wide, the dark pupils dilated and his mouth twisted oddly. Like a small boy trying his darnedest not to cry, she thought and looked away, made uncomfortable by the intensity of his despair.

Then he was weeping, half turned away from her, a man's terrible constrained sobbing made so much the worse by his efforts at self-control.

Aghast, she stared at his bowed head. What could she say? How could she hope to understand? She knew guilt, but hers was a more subtle brand than his. And from this, there was no escape except to die. I am sorry, she thought, oh God, I am sorry and what good will that do? She sat there helplessly and waited for the storm to wear away.

Gradually, he grew quiet, the quiver died away from his shoulders and he too sat, hunched away from her as though walling off his shame. Around them the field was still and drenched in heat. Finally, unable to bear the tension one second longer she said, her voice hesitant and concerned, "I'm awfully sorry. If I can . . ."

"No!" he turned suddenly, his face strange and fierce. "Listen, there's nothing you can say or do, understand? There's nothing! I'm a . . . a goddam coward and I know it! I'm sick with fear. My insides run yellow. I could no more take a platoon through enemy fire than I could fly. I'm through." Then in a gentler voice, "But why I bother you about it I don't know. It's my problem . . ."

"Oh don't!"

"I'm sorry. All I can say is I'm damned sorry. I didn't realize I had so little self-control." He looked at her, his eyes desperate with apology. "I'm ashamed you ever saw me do a thing like this."

"Please, please. I'm the one who's sorry. I can't think what to say and I . . ." she stumbled and stopped unable to manage anything more. She was too exhausted and too sick.

He lit another cigarette with a hand that shook and his mouth twisted in bitter self-contempt. "I'm quite a man, aren't I? You should be proud to know such a hero! Believe me, I'd give anything, anything to take back the last ten minutes!"

"I wish you wouldn't talk. . . ."

"My God, what you must think!" he cried, ignoring her protest.

Almost irritably she broke in, "Please, I don't think anything. Don't you understand, I'm too tired to think about you . . . about anything!"

He stopped short, staring at her, and slow understanding dawned behind his abstracted gaze. "Yes," he said dully after a moment, "sure, I understand. Well. . . ." and with an effort he smiled and rubbed out his cigarette, and avoiding her eyes stared off across the field.

"No you don't," she said contritely. "I mean you don't understand but I know I can't explain it. And now look, it's five after five and I've got to go."

He rose and gave her his hand, then stopped to fold her blanket as she pulled on her shoes and leggings. Then they walked across the field, neither one of them knowing how to break the silence nor caring to. At the hedge she turned and putting out her hand, said, without thinking, "Look, I am sorry. I do care. Why don't you come back tomorrow and bring me a cigarette and maybe we could even be gay about something, okay?"

"Okay," he replied dully and she went on through the hedge leaving him there alone.

"And you didn't even hear him!" she whispered to herself as she plodded across the hot field toward her tent.

CHAPTER 10

"That's odd!"

"What's odd, Harris?" Lee came to stand beside the young technician where he leaned against the supporting pole of Surgery's rear entrance. I'm exhausted, she thought heavily, drawing in a lungful of fresh air. She felt queer. She'd had nothing to eat for breakfast but coffee, for the lingering dysentery made eating a nauseating business. Hunger and fatigue rendered her lightheaded and strangely elated, almost out of control. The fresh air steadied her a little but she still felt as though at any moment she might explode, might fly into irrational pieces.

The heat of the early morning shimmered over the field, a vibrating intense heat that seemed faintly ominous. The rumble of passing trucks sounded from the road, a dog barked insistently from the shabby farmhouse at the far end of the field, and men's voices carried disjointedly from the hospital tents where the canvas walls were already rolled high, as much to let the oven-like heat escape from inside as to allow the entrance of any wandering breeze. Over all these muffled drowsy sounds of the stirring day there lay a heavy pall, a brooding calm that forbode evil somewhere beneath the glittering sun.

"Why, it's the guns, they've stopped!"

"Yes," Harris said, his voice carrying a note of excitement. "All of a sudden they've stopped. Listen!"

Lee stepped out into the sun, cocked her head and listened. There was nothing except the nearby small sounds of their own field.

"See, even that barrage down there this morning has quit! Chi-rist! You don't suppose the damn war's over, do you? You can't hear a damn thing!" The technician's weary face lit up hopefully.

"Can't hear what?" Major Collier stepped out of the tent. "What kind of rumor you cooking up now, Harris? God, it's

hot!" With the back of his hand he wiped at the sweat streaking his pale face.

"Listen, Major. Listen how quiet it is all of a sudden. The guns have stopped everywhere . . . down there." Harris pointed south towards the lines near Coutances. "I swear there's not a piece of artillery firing within twenty miles of here!"

"By God, you're right!" The major's face looked startled a moment, and then he groaned. "That means something's up, something bigger than usual. Christ, nine o'clock and we're just finishing up. Two to one we'll be at it again by two o'clock. Well, how about something to eat, eh?" Again he wiped the sweat from his face with a swift unconscious gesture of his hand.

Half an hour later, as they were finishing their coffee, the stunned silence that hovered over them was suddenly broken by a faint throbbing that seemed to advance from nowhere.

"What's that?" Lee asked, raising her head.

"Listen!" someone else cried.

"Planes! Look! Look. Over there toward the north. My God, will you look at them!"

They were all on their feet now, straining their eyes to see as the faroff hum grew in intensity, an insistent vibrating roar, advancing over the rim of the horizon and droning steadily forward across the sky. Within minutes the field was filled with the throb and thunder of hundreds of engines.

"Bombers!" Collier breathed, his head thrown back. "Hundreds of 'em! Look at them!" His voice was suddenly exultant as he seized Lee by the arm, turning her roughly toward the first planes as they came over high in the sky. "Lee, this is it! This is the big push they've been talking about. They said it was coming soon! The big breakout!" His pallid face glowed with excitement and his dark eyes, rimmed by deep circles of fatigue, were alight.

She stared, openmouthed, seeing him moved for the first time.

Far away and very high in the clear summer sky, long thin trails of vapor inched out of the northwest and crossed the white hot space toward the south.

'Over there too, Major!"

They turned their heads and saw new trails march steadily from the northern horizon and farther, more trails, all converging centrally to move as one huge mass southward. The roar of engines engulfed the field, shaking the very air they breathed

and sending light waves of compression against their ear drums. These were the big planes moving in their high and stately formations, their tremendous trails of mist rolling backward, their wings glinting silver in the sunlight. Then, beneath them, the medium bombers began to appear, coming in over the field quite low and seeming much faster as they roared into sight over the trees, the light shining liquidly on clear domes and aluminum surfaces.

Men began to pour from the hospital tents, corpsmen and walking wounded ran out into the hot field to stand in small clusters, heads tipped back to watch the oncoming planes. Their excited voices shouted back and forth, for everyone knew now that this was the big attack, the long awaited offensive meant to lead the breakout from the Normandy peninsula. The names—Saint-Lô, Paris, the Seine—lay on everyone's lips and echoed softly beneath the thunder throbbing over the earth. Somewhere to the south shattered towns lay waiting in the sun for the huge engulfing explosions that would come within moments. Somewhere, only four or five miles away, men lay in ditches and holes, hearing the oncoming roar, waiting, aware that this was a sound similar to the crack of doom.

Overhead, wingtip to wingtip, with a might that filled the sky, formation followed formation in an aloof distant parade that passed the tiny clusters of awe-struck men gaping up from the blazing hot fields many thousands of feet below.

"Think, Lee, right now some of them are probably still leaving England!" Collier cried, his dark head strained back, sunlight winking from the gold caduceus at his collar. "All the way back to England, Lee!"

She nodded, speechless. Her eyes were filled with tears as she gazed numbly at this spectacle of her own country's power flying steadily, unwaveringly across the sky. The short hairs at the back of her neck prickled with excitement, and she forgot her weariness, forgot her body's sickness, forgot everything, and only knew that never again in her life would she see anything so tremendous.

A shout rose suddenly from the men in the field. Collier grabbed her by the arm again, shouting in her ear, "Look, over there! They're dropping markers. Smoke bombs, see!"

She saw the lead planes turn gracefully toward the west while smoke was already drawing a fine line across the horizon of distant trees and slopes. Even as she stared, the smoke erupted in a number of great bursting flares of dust and thick

gray clouds and seconds later the earth shuddered. The blast of the distant exploding bombs washed faintly over the hospital field, stirring the dusty air and sending a faintly arid breeze against their faces. The first formation completed its wheel to the west and another took its place. Again the earth geysered upward, the awed watchers felt it heave and shake beneath their feet while a distant blast clapped gently against their ears. Seconds hardly separated the exploding sticks, so easily and so effortlessly did the planes wheel in and away as their bombs shot to earth.

"Christ, I feel sorry for the poor devils under that," Collier whispered, his face sobered.

Beyond him, Captain Allen yelled, "Give it to those sons-of-bitches!" and someone else was shouting, "They'll be running around like rats, the *kraut* bastards!"

Lee's own excitement died and she half turned away, watching only the planes as they came. They were so beautiful, so untouchable, so removed and immune from the craters they left, the stink and the pain and the bloody death. Like gods, they were not required to see or care for what they created.

But to most of them standing there in the pitiless glare, this was the symbol of eventual victory. Doubt seemed to vanish in the sun, and exhilarated by the knowledge of their own power, men clapped each other on the back and gazed happily at the distant destruction, indifferent to the fate of those who reeled below it. Yet, when the tremor in their own field grew more pronounced and concussion slapped more sharply against their cheeks and eardrums, the scene changed swiftly. Men began to shout and a hoarse cry traveled among the watchers. They suddenly scattered, everyone ran to climb upon hoods of jeeps or ambulances to gain a better view.

Was something wrong?

What had happened?

Questions rose on dozens of lips as the crash of bombs became noticeably louder. The air shivered across the hot fields in wave after wave of concussion.

"They're falling short! Jesus, they'll be bombing our own lines if they don't stop!" a soldier with a bandaged arm shouted as he ran by the silent doctors and nurses. Across the field men milled, shouting, cursing in doubt, uncertainty and the premonition of disaster.

"MacDonald, have the men disperse. Have Sergeant Morris get the walking wounded out of the tents and have the bearers

stand by to carry out the movable litter patients." Collier turned away from the scene and shouted orders: "Effie, you nurses stand ready here. Come on, the rest of you. If those damn planes drop their sticks much closer we'll all have to be hitting the ditches!"

The doctors and men still by the kitchen tent went off toward the hospital at a run.

"Put your helmets on, kids," Effie said.

"Why doesn't someone stop them?" June Harley cried nervously.

"Huh! You stop them!"

And on they came, open bomb bays gaping dark and menacing in silver bellies, wings glinting triumphantly in the sun while their billowing plumes trailed off to the horizons. The earth shook and heaved and smoked, and still they came, still the great silver wings spread across the sky, and still the dark bombs hurtled toward earth.

Small groups of French stood by their homes, watching the parade of power sail serenely and indifferently above them; infantrymen resting by the roadsides sat rooted in the grass, their dusty faces turned to the sky, reddened eyes fixed in awe on the mystical Air Corps while in their hearts ran the silent prayers of gratitude that they had not yet reached the lines. In the hospital field men still ran in circles mouthing curses. Then, as abruptly as it began, the bombing ended, the last formations revolved across the sky and silence, as shattering as the bombardment, smothered the dusty shrouded earth.

Far to the front those who had survived rose slowly, cautiously, from their holes, dazed and deafened, their ears ringing and their bruised bodies aching. In the silence the screams and cursing of the wounded began. In the unharmed rear, yards away, tanks churned forward, artillery opened up again and fresh companies moved forward into the gap, past the cratered fields, the earth-drowned foxholes, the shattered dead. Except to those men and their general caught by the bombs that had fallen short of their target, the blunder was considered as only one more "it happened." As such, it was chalked up to war.

In the hospital field the little clumps of men broke up slowly, the walking wounded returned to their benches and their waiting, the surgical teams went off to prepare for the influx they knew would soon come. Before twenty minutes had passed, the first ambulance pulled into the field, jounced slowly across the uneven ground and came to a halt before Receiving. Even

as the bearers began to unload, another emerged from the road and behind it, another, and another, and behind those, more.

By the evening of the day of the saturation bombing of the Saint-Lô sector, the First Platoon was packing its tools prepared to follow its division south through the breakout. Late in the afternoon, the Second Platoon of the X Field Hospital moved into the field to take over the still unfinished backlog of surgical cases and the untransportable wounded in shock and post-operative wards.

That night at a late supper served in the Second's kitchen tent, Major Collier issued a bottle of champagne to each officer and man. "Get drunk if you want to," he said, "but be damned sure you're in the trucks at midnight. Anyone who doesn't show gets left behind to face a court-martial and I mean it!"

With her bottle tucked under her arm, Lee started for the nurses' tent, intent on catching a little sleep, when she ran into Stainer.

"I came to say good-by," he told her rather lamely. "I looked for you this afternoon but they said you were busy and, of course, I could see that you were."

"You know we're leaving?"

"Oh yes. The change over on the ward, you know," he reminded her and she nodded, wondering what more to say.

"Well. . . ."

"Say, would you like this?" She held out the bottle of champagne in the dusk . . . "It's champagne. I don't want it. I was just wondering . . . what on earth I'd do with it."

He laughed, suddenly gay. " 'Champagne,' the lady says! 'Do you want it?' she asks. . . . My dear, Lieutenant, I'd love it, but wouldn't you share it with me? Couldn't we take it somewhere and talk?"

She started to say no, that she needed to sleep, but hesitated at the wistful note in his voice. Sleep? She probably couldn't anyway, so why not? This at least she could do without hypocrisy.

"All right."

They found a place in the thick grass near a stream. They took turns sipping at the wine even as they took turns talking, carefully avoiding the present, their voices speaking lightly, vaguely of home, the past, themselves. They compared: he had a brother in the Pacific, a Marine, and both his parents were

still alive, living in a small town in California. He had been called out in his senior year at college, an ROTC shavetail, bright as a lantern and ten times as ignorant of what it was all about.

"Now, a sad sack lieutenant who bucked his way to a Purple Heart," he said and laughed a little and held the champagne bottle overlong at his lips. "What am I going to do when the war's over?" he repeated when she asked. "Well, I *was* going to teach history to high school kids and coach basketball on the side. That was the plan. Now, I don't know. I'd have to go back and finish, get my B.A. and certificate and all that. I don't know. I don't even feel like thinking about it much. How about you?"

She parried the question, and began talking instead of her training, the funny things that had happened. Twilight deepened into night around their laughing voices and their gaiety uncorked by the sparkling wine. Time stole beyond them, an hour, another, and they felt that they knew each other suddenly; they were at ease. Their voices came more quietly and more spontaneously, touched by a forgotten excitement.

In the heavy warmth of the summer evening, in the night that was filled with drunken laughter and obscene shouting, the distant artillery throbbed, muted and soft, and flickered insanely along the horizon. While stars hung bright and intimate above their heads, a sudden wonder and longing crept between them; their quiet voices ceased. The night closed in swiftly, dark and passionate, transmitting a sense of urgency as though life pulsed there just beyond them, as though life, itself, rode the gentle wind and beckoned with soft laughter, gay and derisive, mocking their youth, their loneliness, their fears.

In the smothering dark they turned to each other, turned fumbling and anguished, not recognizing, at first, their desire, but only the wide gulf that cut them off from the sardonic shadows of everything they had known before. He touched her shoulder, meaning to say how much this had meant to him, these few days of grace, these short hours with her, and how he would not easily forget. But the pinpoint of desire, awakened by the glint of sun on hair, by the curve of a body, the line of a cheek, by the mold of lips that had laughed or sighed or spoken to him alone, leaped like a living flame. He wanted. God, how he wanted!

At first she drew away, a little frightened by his hard insistency, but then the thought hovered, why not? What did it

matter? What could possibly matter anymore? Caught by pity and indifference, she relaxed and let his lips find hers. In the warm enveloping darkness, past and present slid away, all thought of the future fled. Why should one remember who one was or what had been or might ever be again? She fled from this barrier of the past; she was alive still after all, she was young.

Yet, in the end, the guards of the past were vigilant and summoned her once more to reality. Traitor! they shrieked. Betrayal! Frantically, she pulled away.

"No! Don't!" she cried.

All the noises of the night rose around them again; the harsh laughter too loud for joy, the voice that cursed obscenely, tainting the warm sweet darkness, the shouts of drunken glee. She shivered, suddenly forlorn.

"Look," he said after a moment, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean . . ." and touched her shoulder, his hand as light as moving grass. "Look, I'm damned sorry . . ."

A warm wind stirred across the unseen fields, a faraway convoy of trucks throbbed among the hills, and loneliness and fear welled out of the night's moving shadows to take possession again.

Hopelessly, he repeated, "I'm damned sorry . . ."

She raised her head and felt the wind brush her hot cheek. The stars seemed to ride untouchable; so far away, so far. Like everything I touch, she thought sadly, like everything I want, even one small moment to escape.

"If it wasn't for the war . . . for all this, I'd have time, but that's just what I don't have . . . time." His low voice hurried on, toneless in discouragement. "I can only wish and want and I know tomorrow I may be sorry as hell, though I doubt that, Lee, but tonight . . . well, tonight I'm not really sorry. I want you like hell tonight. I think that already in just these few days that I . . . well, that I love you. No, listen please, there's no time . . ." as she tried to break in, aghast at what he was saying. "I can only tell you straight out because there's no telling when or if I'll have another chance, and I want you to know. You understand that? I want you to know, more than anything else I want you to know."

"Yes," she murmured, shamed and helpless. What can I say? she thought desperately. How can I ever set things right now? I can't say, don't be sorry, it's not important. I can't tell him that I was only looking for the door out of all this, even if for

one moment. I can't tell him about Bob. Yet, why can't I? Tomorrow we'll be gone. I'll never see him again. "I should tell . . ." she began but he rushed ahead almost frantically.

"I wasn't trying to make you, Lee. You know that, don't you?"

"Oh yes, yes. Please, don't be sorry, especially about that." Oh why does he have to apologize? Why can't he just leave it? Doesn't he know that it can't mean anything! she thought impatiently.

"Well then . . ." He sighed with relief, "as long as you know that it's more than that, though God knows I . . ." He broke off and laughed.

Out in the field the laughter and shouting died. Only the distant thud of artillery broke the quiet like a storm raging and foaming at the buttresses of the sky. Then an engine coughed, caught, and roared to life.

"My God, what time is it?" she jumped to her feet even as a second engine sputtered and roared.

He peered at his watch. "Just about twelve, I think."

"Oh, I've got to go . . ." she started away from him, turned back as he scrambled to his feet, "Good-by . . . Bill. Good luck. Oh, the very best of luck." She touched his arm in the darkness, her fingers brushed his hand and then she ran for the tiny blue lights that marked the ready convoy. The soft brush of her feet in the grass was drowned as another motor started and a distant whistle blew, summoning the platoon to its collective move.

Stainer stood there where she left him. The warm wind moving down from the hills brushed his face and brought to his ears the faroff symphony of destruction. He stood there and waited as the black shadows of the trucks and ambulances moved slowly past, turned heavily onto the road beyond the hedge and groped forward towards the lines again.

Tomorrow, he thought dully, it's my turn. They'll come for me in a jeep and they'll say, Hi Lieutenant, glad to see you're okay, glad you're coming back. And the bastards will know how damn glad I am! With a sigh he turned and made his way back to the single ward tent left in the field. Tomorrow!

There it was, he thought bleakly, time to go back, time enough to die, but no time, not even a moment, to live and make love and hold a little hope in your hands. He was hollow with loneliness and worn out by the small thread of fear that

throbbed deeply within him. Yet his mind caught and held an image of desire and drew a small measure of comfort from its warmth.

CHAPTER 11

The lurid days of Normandy were over. The rolling peninsula of hillside orchards, fields and pastures rimmed by hedgerows pink with blossoms, where the high clear song of the lark rose above the dusty meadows and paths of battle was left behind. All the strange uncertain days were over. Days that had led up from the littered beaches, through the smoking towns and narrow country lanes past small farms ground to rubble and stricken cattle belly upward in the sun; strange uncertain days when men fought with their backs against the sea and the world waited impatiently to honor or to blame. In the end the breakthrough had come and Europe was once more open to the tread of Allied boots.

In the race for the coming victory, the great agonies of Utah and Omaha, of Coutances and Saint-Lô, Caen and Cherbourg, were soon forgotten. Other names of other places took their stead, names of rivers and towns deep in France rolled now from the tongues and out of the presses of the world. But, near Isigny and Sainte-Mère-Eglise, thousands of American soldiers remained behind in Normandy, blind now to the blue summer sky and deaf to the song of the lark. Other men had taken their places and had gone on.

The First Platoon went with them, went down through the blasted remains of Coutances and Granville where the bodies of the defending Germans still lay in the streets and ditches. A confusion of orders halted them a few miles south of Avranches. They were directed by harassed MPs into a field where a tank outfit was already bivouacked, the dark hulks of the Shermans crouched like prehistoric monsters under the trees while their crews lay stretched out around them, wrapped in blankets, boots turned to the sky. For the few hours that were left to the night, the hospital personnel followed their example. In the gray chill dawn of the following morning they crawled out from under their trucks and ambulances and stood stiffly around the field range waiting for the coffee urn to heat.

Dozens of fires twinkled around the field as the tankers squatted on their heels, heating coffee and rations.

"Move out! Move out!" someone shouted and within minutes the tankmen were loading their blankets and gear through the hatches or onto the steel flanks of their monsters. Even as the medics watched, the first engine burst into a full-throated roar that drowned the early morning sounds of the waking countryside. One by one the others thundered into life around the field until the air throbbed and trembled with the racket. As the engines idled, warming, the last of the gear was stowed. The men slipped into open hatches, and the supply trucks, that had spent the night with their column, moved off onto the road, turned north for the long trip back to the nearest QM supply dumps in Normandy and the return for another rendezvous somewhere far to the east and south by nightfall.

Then the lead tank lurched forward with a grinding of gears, picked up speed and headed onto the road to turn south. One by one the others followed, churning past the hospital trucks to clatter out onto the paved road, leaving clouds of dust to whirl and eddy behind them. Within twenty minutes the First Platoon was mounted and moving southward.

At Rennes they turned west along the broad tree-lined route leading from Brittany to central France. Except for foxholes dug at intervals along the roadside to protect German transport drivers from strafing Allied planes, there were few signs of war. The country lay peacefully in the morning sun; level fields barren of hedgerows, long stretches of straight road so unlike the narrow winding lanes of Normandy. Tall slender poplars were planted in perfect order along both ditches and one could see them march to the horizon in converging lines of silver thread.

In the large ancient city of Le Mans they turned north, passing the dark buttressed cathedral, the fine old manor houses and chateaux, with their feudal parks, to arrive at their final destination: a large level field on the road leading from the small village of Alençon to Argentan. Here they set up their tents quickly while the din of increasing traffic thundered past on the road: tanks, trucks filled with soldiers, antiaircraft batteries, heavy artillery pieces; a constant stream of armor and guns and men going to join the battle of the closing of Falaise Gap. Artillery half a mile away rumbled into life and batteries scattered in nearby fields joined in. By noon, the ambulances were already arriving, bringing, for the most part, wounded

Germans caught in the rapidly closing trap to the north. By late afternoon the Receiving Tent was full and litters had overflowed into the hot field where the Germans lay prey to sun and flies and thirst.

Unfortunately, too, many of them were major surgical cases. Filthy, lice-ridden, gangrenous, they died by twos and threes, and as fast as one was cleared through Surgery two more were brought into the field. Across the road their more fortunate comrades were being herded behind a hastily constructed barbed wire fence, while trucks crammed with fifty and sixty POWs streamed down from the north to dump their living burdens into the growing swarm.

Seeing the platoon being swamped beneath enemy wounded, Major Collier sent a hurried request to the commander of this stockade for litter bearers and got not only plenty of these but two captured German doctors who were of course eager to help out among their own. Both fields echoed strangely to the babble of guttural German. The American wounded looked askance at the dirty stolid faces of the enemy in litters beside their own.

The battle of Falaise Gap drew to its foregone conclusion as the Allies slowly closed the pincers of their trap. Thousands of German soldiers were slaughtered and much of their equipment lost as an unprecedented destruction of manpower and material was committed in this dense and concentrated area. British and American artillery poured their fire from the hills overlooking the valley. Allied planes bombed and strafed the narrow gap while Canadian and American riflemen stalked the stragglers. Under these united efforts entire German divisions were destroyed or forced to surrender.

American riflemen, moving through the debris, were shocked at the strewn horror committed in the name of war. Dead animals and men were scrambled along the roads, mixing their torn animal and human flesh and guts and limbs in an unholy carnage. Wagons and burned-out machines, riddled by bullets and shrapnel and often filled with the bodies of their *Wehrmacht* occupants, were overturned and abandoned. Everywhere was strewn a motley assortment of rubbish, gas masks, rifles, field rations, bedding, parts of uniforms, even letters and pictures; all scattered and flung among the sodden horses and men sprawled in the glaring sun. Tanks and personnel, carriers and artillery pieces, were found lined bumper to bumper, some of them riddled, some of them burned, some untouched.

Swarms of flies rose in dense clouds beneath the feet of soldiers advancing through the mess while the odor of burned and decaying flesh hung like a pall over the haunted valley of the Gap.

For the First Platoon, the days accompanying and following this slaughter were woven in a nightmare's sequence; hot, dry, searing days in which the cries of the wounded, both in English and German, formed a fitful undertone to the passing roar of traffic on the road. The heat was made all but unbearable by the stench of pus and blood, of unwashed sweating bodies and the now frequent sweetish horror of gangrene. The Germans seemed to bring their own peculiar smell, a musty animal odor that clung to the litters and blankets long after the men, themselves, were gone.

The struggle for Falaise and Argentan meant no more to the medics than had the struggle for Saint-Sauveur, for Cherbourg, for Saint-Lô or Coutances or any of the dozens of towns or cross-road villages along the way. It was all one to the Shock and Surgical teams, to the aide men and technicians, the ambulance drivers and litter bearers. It was the same constant round of twelve- to eighteen-hour duty shifts, of four or five hours of snatched sleep, of bolted meals and coffee drunk standing in the intervals between cases or ambulances or death.

Their faces grew gray and drawn with fatigue until there was little difference between their appearance and that of their gaunt exhausted patients. Their feet were constantly swollen and tender, and many hobbled. Swarms of yellow jackets and flies, bloated with carrion, made meals an ordeal by contesting every drop and crumb of food, and sent the already frayed tempers of the men into violent spasms of obscene cursing. It became all but impossible to sleep during the sweltering days of August, and, at night there was no chance in the onrush of casualties.

Within days, tension and fatigue had enveloped them until, at last, utterly indifferent to their surroundings, to their work, even to their own weariness, they lapsed into a state of automatic action. Wooden and sparing of every drop of energy, they moved mechanically at their tasks; their shoulders drooped, their arms hung limply, their fingers trembled with fatigue. Beneath the dust and sweat their skin was pallid, their eyes red from lack of sleep and they stumbled about on hollow legs. To add to their misery, dysentery brought on again by the swarms of carrion flies struck them down by the dozen. Yet

there could be no stopping, no rest. Through an agony of cramps and nausea they had to continue, for there was no one to take their place and no way to stop the incoming wounded.

The nurses fared as badly as the men. They grew inured to grime and sweat and were often too weary to run a comb through their hair or even apply lipstick. They virtually lived in their red-stained, dirt-streaked coveralls, seldom even removing them for sleep. With dragging feet, now encased in the new issue combat boots, they wandered to and fro among the litters, pausing occasionally to lean wearily against a tent pole or packing case, their eyes filling with helpless tears of exhaustion. Often in the nurses' tent in the heat of midday someone would sob in despair, utterly defeated, unable to sleep, unable to eat, unable even to think.

There was a quarrel one evening in Receiving between Collier and Captain Allen, a quarrel that flared out of exhaustion and out of hate.

"Goddam it, Joe, what kind of a son-of-a-bitch trick are you trying to pull off now?" Collier had demanded, biting the words off savagely, his dark eyes blazing in the pale strange set of his face.

"Now wait a minute, Ed. I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"You know damn well what I'm talking about. In any case, I'm not taking the time to spell it out. Understand this, I give the orders in this platoon and the sooner you damn well understand that, the better! Sergeant Samson has his instructions from me. That's all, Samson." He turned to snap at the Receiving noncom who stood to one side enjoying the fight blown up so suddenly between the two officers.

God, wait till the fellows hear about this one! he thought. The major's sure browned off! And old Allen looks like he'd just swallowed a mess of castor oil! But he saluted stiffly, "Yes sir," and walked off, the corners of his lips twitching when his back was safely turned to the two angry doctors.

"Oh, for God's sake, Ed, this will be all over the platoon!"

"Hell yes, of course it will. As a matter of fact, I don't give a damn if it is. I've told you before, Joe, that I'm the man who has to take the responsibility and when I say I want a thing done a certain way, that's what I want. You're not involved if anything goes wrong. You take a hell of a lot on yourself, friend, and I don't like it. Jesus Christ, the least a

man with your brains can do is come consult with me if you don't like something." Collier's tone was openly contemptuous.

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" Allen cried, his voice slurred with barely controlled fury and resentment. "Listen, I read those orders that came down from Army, you know. I was doing exactly what they stated. If you . . ."

"I don't give a damn what you read and from what army. In this platoon I'm CO and I'll give the orders. I happen to have made that pretty clear at our last Officer's Call, and if I remember, you objected. Yes? And we thrashed it out then and there and I not only stated the policy I wanted followed but had it made into a specific directive so that there could be no mistake."

"All right, you did, but Army orders explicitly state . . ." And Allen's lip turned up in a badly suppressed snarl. "Hell, I can't believe you're such a *kraut* lover as all that! After all, your people . . . you have a pretty good reason not to like them! I can't understand why . . . then, you kick up such a fuss . . ." He spluttered beside himself with rage.

"Crap!" Collier said rudely and violently. "There's no more to be discussed, Joe. We'll take in any German major case into Surgery if our own men are minor cases and can wait. You understand that I hope?"

"You can't . . . Headquarters states . . . My God, you can't . . ." Allen cried.

"The hell I can't!" Collier turned his back and walked off leaving the other with his mouth still open in protest, his lips still fumbling over the outraged words. He closed his mouth then with a snap and glared after the major's retreating back. A look of pure hatred twisted his pale pudgy features. The goddam bastard! The son-of-a-bitch!

Oblivious to the strange cry that rose suddenly in the murky depths of the crowded Receiving Tent he walked off mouthing his inward curses. The flap connecting the big tent to the smaller central square closed over him as the cry rose again, rose and rose to an instant's shrillness, then broke on a deep, gurgling cough.

"Somebody go get the major! We've got a hell of a thing here!" Sergeant Samson cried as the litter bearers, with averted faces, placed their burden on the floor. Again, and over and over in a senseless repetition of agony, the cry rose to shatter the weight of misery and fatigue jammed beneath the sagging canvas walls. On the wooden bench near the entrance a soldier

with his arm in a bloody sling shuffled his feet back and forth. The man beside him lifted an unsteady hand to the long scratch lying open along his unshaven cheek. Someone cursed steadily ınder his breath. Fear grew among them, a blind fear that ıered with the rising cry of agony to shiver in petrified fascı-ıon with its bubbling climax: a fear of pain and loneliness ıd death, sprung from frightened pity and complete revulsion ɔr the horrible thing that lay there uttering its strangled ream over and over; a thing, a man, faceless and exposed eneath the naked bulb hanging from the center pole.

Lee followed Collier to the litter and knelt across from him, to stare unbelievingly at the shattered head. There was no face where a face should have been, no familiar look of man but only the featureless hurt thing whose despairing half-shriek gave birth to a nameless fear within her own heart. Any other animal, she thought, would have been shot on the spot and its misery ended.

"Ahhhhhhhhh. Ahhhhhh."

"Jesus!" Collier whispered. Then aloud. "Whole blood, Lee."

When she returned, seconds later, with the bottle he was already at work cutting away the torn filthy uniform from the riddled flesh of head and neck. With gauze squares he sponged at the tangle of flesh and clotting blood that clogged the windpipe and strangled the high whine of pain to a desperate sucking for air. As he worked the others waited, some half raised on their litters, some leaning forward on the benches, cradling heads wearily in dirt-encrusted hands, some lying still, only their eyes fixed and alert.

"Ahhhhhhhh."

From the corner of her eye as she knelt again, Lee saw a man on a nearby litter light a cigarette with shaking hand, and though the faceless one's labored, half-strangled breathing filled the tent, she heard indistinctly a man retching miserably behind her. She could feel the tension, the urgent fear that charged the smoke-filled room, and she, too, grew cold.

"Jesus God!" Collier cried. He raised his pale, sweat-streaked face and she saw that the dark eyes were filled with a deep unfathomable misery. "Tell Samson to bring bearers and you get a trachea tube. We can't risk moving him till we get this windpipe cleared. God knows how they got him this far. . . ."

Again she rose and went off quickly, glad to be out of earshot if only for a moment from that anguished scream. But just as she returned the cry broke and died away and the men

stirred restlessly along the wall and someone cursed violently, nerves raw, "Christ! that's enough! Why can't they stop him? Can't they shut him up?"

"For God's sake, nurse, how can he still be alive?"

As in a dream she threaded her way back across the litte past the terrified questioning eyes and knelt again. A you corpsman held a draining bottle of blood aloft and averted hi face, his eyes not meeting hers as she came beside him.

"Look at his medical tag, let me know how much penicilli he's had."

With quick nervous fingers she slipped the tag off the litter handle, her eyes absently noting the rusty stain of dried blood on the manilla cover. "Identity unknown," she read, "Infantry, 31X Regiment, probably A Company, First Bn." She raised her head. "He's had 40,000 units, Ed." She glanced back at the tag. Caught in an open field beneath heavy German mortar fire. The aide man must have reached him almost at once, must have stilled the churning of his stomach before this sight and somehow gotten him back. Had anyone out there known who he was? she wondered. No, or there wouldn't be this "Identity unknown." Whoever he was, with the flesh hanging in dripping ribbons from his skull, bits and shreds of it clinging to his jacket and splattered on his spasmodically clutching hands, he was making a gallant fight for life. But you're a monster, she thought. No one, not even the best plastic surgeon in the world can give you back a real face.

"All right. I can't keep the goddam tube cleared out here, Lee. The light's too bad. Walk along beside him, keep the blood out of his throat and you, Corporal, bring the blood right along. All right, men, easy. Damn easy!"

"Yes sir." With sick faces the two bearers bent to the handles, yet, even as they straightened the unknown man uttered his strangled shriek once more. It rasped along the nerves of the others and left them shuddering anew in the grasp of naked fear. Men raised their heads and listened against their will for the gurgling finish, and when it came they moved restlessly, unnerved and frantic.

"Oh Christ!"

Someone gagged, spat loudly.

"All right, be quick about it. Watch his head there. Come on, let's get out of here!" Collier cried impatiently.

When they had gone a long low sigh of released breath hung oddly in the crowded tent. The men sat back on their benches,

lay back on their litters and low hushed voices broke out suddenly on all sides.

In Surgery the others gathered around Collier's table.

"Good God, Ed!" George exclaimed. "What can you do with that?"

"Holy Mother," Effie Newcomer whispered to herself and hastily made the sign of the cross over her sagging bosom before she turned away.

"Poor devil! Jesus, the poor guy!"

"Lee! Quick, hold him!"

A great bubble of blood rose in the slashed flesh and held a second before bursting in a red wet splash. The hoarse animal cry rang in the stinking hot tent. A deep primitive instinct shuddered through Lee and cried out for flight from this unearthly subhuman thing that lay strangling in its own blood. Yet, automatically at the command "Hold him!" she threw herself against the heaving chest and bore down with all her weight to keep him from twisting from the table while Collier seized a sponge and worked away the blood, his hands moving fast and brutally through the mangled flesh. Within seconds he had cleared the trachea tube and gained clear passage for the air which was sucked in immediately in a shrill whistle of sound. The man's writhing body relaxed slowly, the tightly drawn large muscles of his legs and arms slackened and the battered head ceased its constant desperate weaving as his lungs filled with air again.

"About time, poor devil. All right. Rig another bottle of whole blood, Harris. Lee, help me debride. Mullens, see that the tube stays clear. He's got a chance though I doubt, given the choice, he'd want it much."

They went to work over the mutilated head, cutting away hanging flesh, blood clots, bone fragments. There was little though that they could do beyond tying off blood vessels and cleaning up the wound area; there was nothing they could do to restore the man's identity. Wire what was left of the jaw, sew up what was possible of neck and cheek and shattered upper jaw, clean out the ruined eyes and send the remains back to the States where some one in a general hospital would begin the long slow process of rebuilding a face, of sorts, an unnaturally stiff scarred surface from which glass eyes would stare blindly and an oddly puckered, twisted gap of a mouth might, perhaps, be able to speak. Whoever had known him before

might know him again by the set of his body, the color of his hair, a mole or a mark, but by nothing else.

"That does it! Litter bearers." Collier stepped back, wiping the sweat from his face with rolled sleeve. Yes, that does it, he thought, all that can be done, at least. He'll live on, this identity unknown, but whether he'll ever thank us in his heart is damned questionable.

Lee wearily turned away from the table to dump a handful of waste in the overflowing can beneath the instrument table. After she had finished cleaning up she walked listlessly over to the scrub trough to strip off her gloves, without a backward glance for the huge bandaged head that went by on its way to Shock and slow recovery. Beside her, Collier washed carefully, head bent, eyes fixed blindly on his hands. He was still lost in the operation just completed, meticulously he reviewed all that he had done. Yes, he thought, not wholly satisfied, I doubt that he thanks us. And he sighed and slipped the sodden mask from his mouth to dash a few drops of cool water against his sweaty face. Looking up he caught her sideways glance and gave her a slight weary smile.

"Better check Receiving. I hope to God you don't bring in another like that one, baby!"

"I hope to God the next one like that dies!" she replied sullenly and turned away as his eyebrows queried and his dark eyes followed her thoughtfully, faintly disturbed.

As she passed the table Mullens stooped to gather a pile of bloody dressings and she caught the odor of blood and pus and defecation. With a slight shudder she went on into Receiving, and with sinking heart saw the litters jammed together on the floor and the dark hunched shadows of the walking wounded under the sloping canvas.

Ah my God, would this never end!

CHAPTER 12

The Third Army moved on and with it the X Division, and behind the Division, the First Platoon. The month of August receded into a background of hot dusty summer days and September came to find the Allies advancing across France, moving now in swift rushes, now by slow stages,

from crossroads to crossroads, river to river until by the middle of this first month of fall American riflemen had covered more than three hundred and fifty miles of French soil.

The route of the X Division had been steadily eastward from Argentan, east and just south of Paris through the lovely rolling country of Sens, Troyes and Orléans, old and famous towns which would be well remembered by the thousands of soldiers who sweated and cursed under the heat, and walked through the swirling dust that perpetually cloaked the roads and cobbled streets. They soon grew used to the wild jamborees of these liberated towns, the jubilant effervescent welcome of these people of central France who, unlike their fellows in Normandy, seemed truly glad the Allies had come.

With the first approaching soldier the streets would fill with shouting, weeping, laughing men and women and bedraggled children. They would come leaping and dancing, holding aloft cobwebbed bottles of raw cider or rawer calvados or waving faded bunches of field flowers or armfuls of small, knobby and flyspecked fruit. With glad excited faces they would proffer these gifts to the weary riflemen slogging down their streets or to the long convoys of trucks or tanks that roared and rumbled slowly by.

Before the power of the Americans, they went insane with joy, throwing their bottles and their fruit with wild abandon, tossing the faded bouquets into the laps of startled infantrymen riding in open half-tracks, hurling themselves upon the marchers to belabor them with kisses. They lined the streets leaving scarcely enough room for the troops to pass. They shrieked and snake-danced along with the advancing soldiers, endlessly crying, *"Vive! Vive les Americains! Vive les Amis!"*, and raised their arms, holding the fingers spread in the familiar victory sign, their faces alive with crazy glee. *"Vive! Vive!"* echoed back and forth in the narrow twisting streets, bouncing from old stone walls; *"Vive! Vive!"* heard even above the roar of tank engines and the constant rumble of passing trucks. Many a grinning weary soldier caught the seedy bouquet flung by a girl and twisted the small token in the camouflage netting of his helmet, and many a young Yank got his hug and his kiss before the column passed on.

Often, the most excited and irrepressible of crowds fell silent before the grandeur of the long thundering armored columns that clanked past them, the huge dusty Shermans with gun muzzles raised and helmeted soldiers staring straight before

them over the steel hatch rims. Awe-struck, they watched the endless convoys of 155s and 105 artillery pieces, and the even mightier 240s, that twisted through the tortuous streets behind their gigantic tractors. Sometimes, these watching people openly wept at the sight of grim-faced young men of another nation come from combat as they sat or stood or walked past them, the weary infantry smiling a little at pretty girls, their dust-reddened eyes and the sudden straightening of their backs and aching shoulders reflecting gratitude for the small glory these alien people lining the streets tendered to them alone with their tears and their joy.

The summer had passed like a long night's dream with nightmare shadings for the members of the First Platoon. They set up their tents on sunny slopes near Sens with its viaducts, in fields beside small crossroad villages near Troyes and Orléans and Nemours, on the Seine. Each field and each slope was like the one before and passed in the succession of unmemorable places. Sometimes, the tents were hardly pegged before the casualties came; and sometimes, they stayed only forty-eight hours, then packed and moved on again in the wake of the onrushing division and the retreating Germans. More usually the fields overflowed with wounded for a week or more and it was work and sweat and move to work and sweat again.

They, too, grew used to the flag-bedecked, newly liberated towns and the wild gratitude of the French. They, too, accepted with weary thanks the hard sweet fruit and waved to the old ladies who sat in the heat and dust beside the roads to offer small tumblers of calvados or raw cider to any Yank who had the time to pause and down it there. They, too, returned the hysterical victory signs of dirty children standing barefoot in the ditches, their gaunt streaked faces split by ecstatic grins, and from the old people standing at the head of their oxen or by the gates of their homes turning toothless smiles upon the passing trucks.

It will be hard, Lee thought more than once, to ever forget the cry. *"Vive! Vive les Amis!"* echoing long after the rumble of the convoy has died away from these old streets.

Time passed in the dust and heat and swift succession of events. North of Nemours on the Seine they heard the news of the liberation of Paris, news that seemed a little strange and hard to believe, just as it had seemed inconceivable four years before when the Germans had reached the city and Paris had fallen. Yet they forgot this heroically emotional liberation

quickly enough in the press of more tangible events. In the general exhaustion, the general constancy of effort, it was very difficult to get excited about anything, even this.

Just before they left the field near Troyes an entire armored division came roaring out of the west from Brittany where the mopping up of enemy garrisons in ancient fortress towns and sea ports was almost ended. The big Shermans and clattering half-tracks filled with riflemen passed all one day in a magnificent unforgettable sight. At evening when the last tank had passed, the last jeep scuttled on, the billowing clouds of dust settled slowly, powdering the bushes beside the road, the trees overhead and the drab hospital tents with darker shade. A strange discordant quiet followed, a deep unnatural calm in which all the small sounds unheard during the day came one by one to life again.

On the following day an enemy panzer division, dug in at Troyes, inflicted heavy casualties on this same unit and their wounded came pouring back to the platoon's dusty fields. The magnificence of the passing armor of yesterday was lost in the sordid crowding of its waste, and for three days and nights the hospital worked desperately against a staggering backlog. On the evening of the third day an evacuation hospital pulled into the field beside them, and set up their tents. That night, relieved, the platoon packed its equipment and, sleepless still, moved on.

Eastward, moving always eastward, following the rumble of artillery, the trail of broken vehicles, the refuse of war. Eastward through a hundred small and dusty towns, through a dozen cheering, weeping cities and across a lovely autumn landscape where, here and there, war had left a charring footprint on the sunny earth. They passed beneath stately cathedral towers of another age. They rumbled down lanes lined with slender poplars, crossed small streams and larger rivers, their wheels echoing hollowly on the wooden planks of Bailey bridges, or tires whining along the steel treads of pontoon spans; eastward through the early fall, touched, as the summer before it, with the stench of death and littered with the rubble heaps of destruction.

There was one small town near Châlons with a cool shaded park and a statue of St. Joan holding a banner high over a fountain where cold water ran, and here they paused to fill their canteens and wash away the sweat and dust. There was the shambles of a railyard and station along the route where they

stopped to set the arm of a child, broken by a truck in a convoy ahead. There was the stinking horror of Saint Dizier in the hot sun with its dead cattle scattered at the town's outskirts and the burned-out tanks and half-tracks in the yellow fields of wheat over which hung the nauseating stench of roasted human flesh. There was the German horse-drawn hospital convoy burned and shattered along the road, caught by strafing American planes though the wagon tops and sides were plainly marked with large red crosses. The dead medical personnel and the wounded on their litters lay tumbled in the ditches and a terrible feeling of guilt and of fear assailed the living hospital that passed by them. Someone cursed the Air Corps loudly and obscenely.

A sense of timelessness settled like a heavy winter fog over Lee's mind. She no longer knew or cared where past ceased and present began and never gave thought that a future could possibly evolve. For days at a time she moved in a stupor of sheer exhaustion and was utterly indifferent to everything around her. Like a sleepwalker trapped within the confines of a dream she moved automatically through her work and the war retreated beyond the barrier of her indifference. She hardly heard the labored breathing of the wounded nor the endless whispering voices of fear; she hardly looked into the faces of the men that crossed her table. She was far too tired, too drained and empty to heed each new demand upon her compassion; the deep lethargy of fatigue was in itself protective.

Sometimes letters came momentarily to snap this brittle shell, worn envelopes from half across the globe and twice, thinly scrawled notes from Able Company, 31x Regiment, X Division. Often she received them blindly, stuffing them into the deep pockets of her coveralls where they lay unremembered until there came a break and a chance to launder the bloodstained uniform. Then they were not always welcome; for, within the breach they too often made in her protective indifference, loneliness and despair would return to leave her miserable and shaken. She would see all too clearly again the empty unholy carnage of the war; she would find time to pity and to care. Collier's words returned to echo hopelessly within her thoughts, "Don't look at them. For God's sake, don't try to see them or you're lost! If you're blind how can you care?"

Yes, what could you care? Yet, Collier himself cared. She knew that only too well. He cared more than the rest of them.

Don't look? How could you help but look and see when

the hot pale sky pressed you down, mocking your impotence; when you could not see yourself as more than a tiny figure clinging to the scarred earth! And lost again, unnerved, she would think too much of death and be convinced that never again would she see her young husband, never again feel the touch of his hand, hear his laughter or his voice, never lean down again to stroke the thick dark hair in the full of the night nor feel through the darkness his insistence, the wild tumult of passion alive in the hard flesh of his body.

It would have been better, she thought, if I'd never known him, never married!

Don't look, don't see, don't care. Brave words and lonely ones and without meaning. They were as empty for her as they were for the intense and driven surgeon; unlike him she perceived their emptiness.

That summer the sky was merciless over Europe. It shriveled and burned the flesh from the dead and choked the breath of the living, and under its huge brazen and inescapable arch she was trapped and exhausted, lost in a never-ending wasteland that drained life's blood and sanity. And she was not alone; they were all of them trapped and they were all of them changing slowly.

"What's the matter, Lee? Can't sleep either?"

She jumped a little, gasped, and turning her head saw Collier standing over her. She relaxed, the tenseness smoothing away from her face.

"Jesus! I didn't mean to scare you. You're jumpy as a cat, aren't you?"

She shrugged lightly. "Maybe. I just woke up. I guess I had a nightmare. I feel as if I did but I don't remember anything very concrete. Oh well . . . it doesn't matter . . ." she broke off and sat up on the blanket.

"Nightmare?" he asked dully, and then, after a moment, "Don't I get invited?"

Startled she glanced up again. He stood above her with his back to the bright sun, his face in shadow. A cigarette dangled loosely from one listless hand at his side.

"Sure. Sit down." Bemused, she moved over on the blanket, making room for him.

"Oh hell, if you'd rather, just say so and I'll take off . . ." he said, still standing there. There was an odd suppressed note in his voice.

"No. No, Ed, sit down," she said wearily. "Sit down and let me bum a cigarette. Anyway," she glanced irritably at her watch, "it isn't as if I had much more sleep to lose, you know."

"Okay." He lowered himself with unusual care to the blanket, his face turned away as he searched for a pack of cigarettes and his lighter. When he did turn back to her she was shocked to see the unhealthy gray pallor of his unshaven face, the bloodshot and rimmed dark eyes that seemed to slumber in their hollow sockets.

What's the matter with him? She stared as he extended the pack and then looked down at his shaking hand. For God's sake, is he ill? she thought, stunned. Then he sighed and she caught the odor of stale liquor. Had he been drinking then? Drunk? No, that's impossible, she thought numbly but remembered how he had stood so oddly above her swaying a little from toe to heel.

"You're a damn good nurse, kid," he said. "Did I ever tell you what a damn good nurse you are? No? Well . . . say, what the hell are you staring at?" he demanded harshly.

She stared back, stricken and mute, watching the well-formed lips twist into an ugly sneer as he continued in the same harsh flat voice, "Want me to go away and leave you to your exotic dreams, baby? Or maybe I mean erotic!"

"No, don't go," she replied weakly, fascinated by his ravaged, weary face.

"Oh? Well then, how about a little nip of calvados, sweetheart? Been saving it just for you. Here . . ." he squirmed around to haul a flat pocket flask from his hip pocket. "Not much left, damn it!" He shook the flask ruefully and held it up to the sun.

"No thanks, Ed. No. No, really!" She realized at once that she'd answered too quickly and much too vehemently.

"Don't be such a goddam goody-goody, my dear." He leaned forward to peer into her face. "Sometimes I think you're the damnedest little snot of a school girl I've ever had the misfortune to come across! What's the matter? You afraid I'm drunk?"

"I don't care if you are or not. I . . ." she began in a subdued voice but he interrupted roughly,

"Listen, I been meaning to tell you something and this is as good a time as any. You think I'm pretty good, don't you? Oh yes, I can feel hero worship as well as the next one and just because I'm pretty good with my hands you think I'm a sainted

healer, a sort of charmed priest of medicine. Ah, I know, kid, it's in your face sometimes. Well then, listen, I want to disillusion you before you get hurt. I'm a man first, see. A man and damned glad of it!" He threw back his head and laughed. He sobered abruptly and stared at her, his dark eyes sardonic. "I'm a frail vessel, kid, a damn frail vessel. I'm full of sin and crap and tears and tainted like all the rest, my dear, and I'm as proud of that as anything. You're just a youngster still, you haven't got more than a glimmer of an idea what this is all about—" and he waved his head at the hot field, "just a glimmer. When I was your age, and that's damn near fifteen years ago, I was the same way, I cared a hell of a lot about a lot of things, I even prayed if you can believe it. I've even done a bit of penance for my so-called sins until I found out that that isn't what absolves a man or gets him out from under this goddam stinking pile of humanity."

"What does, Ed?"

"What does? Yes, what does? I don't know and I think that's the answer: you never know. Maybe that means nothing can absolve you and you can never deny your own humanity and maybe it means nothing at all because after all it's quite possible there isn't very much to all this. Should we be so profound though?" he grinned and leaned toward her. "I don't feel profound. I damn well don't feel much of anything.

"You know I've had all kinds of women in my time. No, don't jump away like a frightened rabbit! I'm trying to tell you something for your own good, you little fool. I've had all kinds of women in my time, some of them beautiful and some of 'em not; some of 'em good and some of 'em not, but none of them, none of them ever thought of me as especially heroic, so the idea's entirely new to me, see, and I feel I should take notice of it—show my appreciation some way . . ." His lips twitched broadly, broke into a delighted grin. He leaned back, slapping his legs with the flat of his hands and again his laughter exploded roughly.

She stared at him appalled. Was he only making fun of her or was he really drunk? She couldn't decide and in a few seconds she gave up trying, for anger had crept like fire through her veins as she saw the ugly sardonic twist of his mouth. Without a word she began to pick up her clothes scattered on the blanket.

"What's the matter? Scared of me?" he demanded.

Clutching her socks and boots she leaped to her feet. "No

but like every other darned fool I don't like being laughed at!" She started to turn away when he shot out a surprisingly strong hand to catch her bare ankle, almost throwing her flat.

"Not so fast! Come on, I'm not laughing, come on, here . . ." He tried to pull her down again, his hands rough on her body, infuriating her all the more. "I'm flattered, honest kid. I just wanted to warn you so that the others, well, so that there would be no cause for the others to laugh. Come on, will you?"

"You can laugh! All of you can laugh!" she panted, pushing him away. "I don't give a damn! Oh I don't care!" and she ran off across the shimmering field, tears of rage stinging her eyes and her boots flopping ridiculously against her chest as she ran.

Hearing voices within the nurses' tent she dropped her boots and ran on to the latrine, wanting only to be alone, wanting to forget his pale sneering face and his laughter. Fortunately, the small tent was empty and within its doubtful sanctuary she burst into sobs. It was too much! Too much! She had no one, no one anywhere now. I hate him! I hate him! she thought over and over as she cried, small half-smothered sobs, head bent and feet wincing in the dry stubbled grass. I'll never give him or any of them cause to laugh again!

CHAPTER 13

On the 26th of September the entire X Division was pulled out of the line and sent thirty miles to the rear for a week of rest and relaxation; seven days and seven nights of sleeping, eating, showering, drinking, and all the rest that men with almost four months of solid combat behind them could crowd into one short week.

Major Collier's dry, weary voice repeated the order twice before its full effect was felt by the personnel of the First Platoon. Then bedlam broke loose.

"A week! Christ, I'll sleep the whole damned time!"

"Not me, brother! I'm gonna find me a mademoiselle and for seven days I'm gonna . . ."

"Wonder where we're gonna go? Paris, maybe?"

"Paris! My God, man, where've you been? Paris is off limits

to anything under a major and even then gold leaves got to go slumming!"

"We can wash everything we've got, Effie. Gee, we'll be clean again. If I don't get the dust out of my hair this time I never will!"

Tired and happy and filled with anticipation every member of the unit helped clear away the surgical backlog and transfer the post-operative patients to the Second Platoon already setting up beside them. The weary nurses packed equipment even as the men struck the tents above their heads, and the hot fields echoed with cries and curses. By four that afternoon the trucks were loaded, the convoy formed, and silent now they climbed in to take their places. Only a few nights ago they had arrived at this field in darkness and had unloaded their gear beneath the brilliant flashes of artillery, setting up their hospital in a slow steady autumn rain. Now it was hot and dusty again; now they were moving away, turning back for the first time since they'd come to France.

Lee braced herself on a seat near the door and thought dejectedly of the long ride back through the dust and heat. It wasn't the proper attitude, she knew, but she was too tired to care, too tired to find even the idea of a break exciting. Sweat trickled along her cheeks, ran in rivulets down her spine and she felt as though her whole body was encrusted with a scab of filth. She tried to remember how long it had been since she'd had a shower but even this escaped her, and so, thoroughly miserable, she leaned back against the jolting metal side and stared at the dusty field receding beyond the spotted glass. How long were we there? she wondered.

The ambulance sent dust swirling out behind in the tree-lined road and raising her face she watched the hot white blank of sky slide by above the arching branches. All my life, she thought, I'll be especially grateful for coolness and shade. All the rest of my life the wind blowing will make me happy. I'll climb hills, high hills where the wind blows grass that touches the sky and the trees are always rustling and bending. Up there I won't care for anything or anyone. Nothing will be able to touch me. Ahhh, this damned heat! She sighed and irritably plucked at the crusted collar of her coveralls. It was disgusting to be so filthy!

As the slow minutes passed to hours she drowsed a little, but each time sleep seemed within her grasp, the ambulance would jolt against a rock or rut and her head would be snapped

cruelly against the metal side. A deep restlessness began to possess her. She began to think that she could not stand one more minute in the cramped stifling cabin, one more second of the jolting and slipping about on the narrow bench. With a desperation that approached frenzy she wanted to tear the stained heavy clothing from her body, the clumsy boots from her feet and to plunge deep, deep into the depths of water somewhere. It might even be pleasant to drown, she thought wryly, watching as a long hill unwound behind them. At its crest they suddenly stopped.

"This is it!" their driver cried cheerfully. He hopped out and ran around to yank open the door, all but spilling Lee and June Harley into the field already shadowed in the evening light.

Dazed, Lee stepped out into a lush thick meadow and stood staring around her, hardly daring to believe her eyes. The hillside sloped away to a wide valley in which a placid river reflected the glory of sunset. A cool wind rose along the hill, stirring the bushes and trees scattered at random across its face and bending the tall grasses to and fro as waves dip over the open sea.

My God, she thought, this is the stuff of dreams!

Behind her the men poured off the open trucks, dragged out tents and kitchen equipment, their voices sounding excited, relieved, happy in the twilight and coolness. The polished surface of the great coffee urn winked silver in the afterglow as the cooks set up the field range in a park-like grove of trees at the hill's crest.

"Jeez, this is all right!"

"Hey Sarge, where we gonna put the Nurses' Tent? How about the uh . . . latrine?"

"Major, where do you want the Headquarters Tent?"

On a lesser hill curving away below, long streaks of white glimmered through the dusk, and after a moment of staring, Lee saw that they were rigid rows of crosses planted along the green ridge. In the center a whitewashed pole stood alone and at its head an American flag flapped lazily, a tiny spot of color folding and unfolding against the rich glow of the evening sky.

Effie Newcomer came to stand beside her. "Where in hell are we?" she asked. "And what's that down there? A cemetery?"

"I saw a sign saying 'Thiaucourt' a way back," Lee replied absently. "I think they're the last war, from Verdun I guess."

"Oh?" the older woman moved restlessly and turned away.

"At least it looks peaceful down there." Her voice was hoarse with fatigue, her face gray, and the wrinkles fanning from the bloodshot eyes were pronounced even in the soft light.

She looks ill, Lee thought surprised. Ill and old.

As though aware of her gaze Effie moved off, face averted, every line of her big body sagging.

After a moment Lee followed, feeling drugged and unreal and still hardly believing the place, the time, the night ahead without work, the week ahead without war. Like a sleepwalker she followed her chief to the group gathering around the field range and the ration cases.

"Well, what do you think of our seven-day heaven?" Collier asked, falling into step beside her.

"Is that what it is?" she asked numbly.

"Hell, I guess so. Know where we are?"

"Thiaucourt?"

"Yes. We're about three miles from the town. The division is scattered along the river down there, handy to the bath so to speak." He looked about him and sighed. In the failing light he, too, seemed to have let down his guard, he looked vulnerable and sad.

Will he get drunk? she wondered. Probably, and why not? And she smiled wryly, not so much amused as mildly startled that she didn't care.

He, seeing the absent, forgetful smile imagined his dismissal and walked away without another word. She won't forget it, he thought irritably. The darned little prig! If she hasn't seen a man drunk before it's time . . . my God, it's time . . .

"Here's your coffee, Major."

"Thanks." Absently, he took the offered cup and moved over to join Mason and George where they squatted on upturned helmets. Damned little prig! A black rage filled his weary heart, stunning him with its sudden intensity. For a moment he stood among the others, cup in hand, staring with dark, furious eyes at nothing. His breath caught in his throat, he felt smothered and hot, drowned in the insanity of anger.

"Ed . . . Ed." Concerned, Mason stood up and touched his arm. Like a dreamer awakening Collier shook the hand away and turned to look at his friend, his fury draining. My God, he thought uneasily, what's coming over me? This is madness. Aloud he said, "What's that, Tim?"

"Sit down, man," Mason said, relieved to see the mottled color die from the other's face.

"Sure. I'm tired." He sat down cross-legged in the grass. Get drunk, he told himself. You've killed the one good thing that's come along in years. You won't get it back. She's finished with you so what can it matter? Get stinking, lousy, blind drunk for seven days and seven nights. Forget a woman's body and a woman's soul. They weren't for you in the first place, were they? And absently he shook his head, dismissing her. But he could not so easily rid himself of his mood of dismay at the suddenness and force of his anger. His temper had never been easy, he had always flared up swiftly, too swiftly he knew, but this was different now, and it disturbed him. This was irrational and beyond his control; he no longer seemed to have the ability to shed rage, instead he nursed it sullenly, like something of special value. It almost frightened him.

Within half an hour the cold meal was consumed, the urn of scalding coffee emptied and one by one they scattered to their pup tents and their bed rolls. Almost as one they crawled into their sacks, grateful for the darkness and the cool steady wind that rose out of the valley to breathe among the bushes and the grass. For most of them it was the first time in many months that they had been able to crawl into their sleeping bags at the beginning of night with all the cool darkness ahead in which to sleep.

For the first time in weeks Lee drifted off into a deep dreamless sleep. She woke hours later completely disoriented; she thought herself somehow back in the stuffy unbearable ambulance. Then the tent flap snapped gently in the wind and she felt the coolness against her cheeks, and realizing where she was, relaxed again in the soft sleeping bag with a sense of security and peace. She was safe, she could sleep or wake as she willed; for seven days she was safe.

She turned her head so that she could see the stars bright and near through the open flap. What time was it? she wondered too lazy to raise her arm and find her watch. Anyway, time didn't matter, even here. She lay listening to the wind, letting its lonely song stir through her own fitful memories; memories of the beach in Normandy, memories of soldiers coming ashore singing, their teeth white in dust-caked faces as they swung by toward the dunes leaving the half-lilting, half-bawdy English songs to echo amid the rumble of machines and wash of sea; memories of soldiers resting along the roadsides, gray-faced with weariness and covered with dust, infantrymen moving up at night in shadowy columns, some of

them dying alone under the lights of her table without glory, without hope, without justice, or men pushed out into the wasteland by their kind and left there with little hope of return other than as maimed, dead or mad.

For them she felt an overpowering sense of guilt; compared to them she knew that she was of no importance here. Compared to what they knew of cruelty, courage and death she knew nothing. She only felt that she could understand them because she saw them, yet, of course, she could not really know. They were little more than shadows projected across her imagination while the war behind them loomed too large and was too difficult to comprehend.

Sometimes, in imagination, she saw herself deeply religious and being absolved of this guilt as a Catholic might kneel in the twilight calm, the deep cathedral quiet, cool with the dusk of unhurried years, shifting the burden of guilt and blame to the anonymous ear of a listening priest. Yet an image of her own small voice traveling through space to echo tinnily against God's great ear would always shatter the momentary sense of peace, for she knew with every instinct of her being that her poor cry would only die to a whisper and the whisper return, empty and muffled, to fade on an aimless wind. There was here no peace of soul, no absolution from this done in the name of her own humanity. Perhaps, there was no God.

The night wind beyond the tent flap beckoned now. She listened to its sigh among the tree tops, a lonely yearning sound, a long low moan rising from the valley to sing along the rim of hills and wander at will among the meadow grasses. She caught the image of tall grasses bending, dancing, swaying together across the slope, singing far below among the white crosses which shone luminously in the night, a deep murmur of sound like a sigh through the ordered crosses set so neatly end to end, as if marching across the rising ground.

An urgent longing seized her. Restlessly, she moved on her cot and suddenly decided, leaned down to grope for her boots. Finding them, she slipped out of her bag, pulled on her coveralls and, boots in hand, stepped noiselessly into the night.

Away from the dark shape of the tent she knelt to draw on her boots, buckling the thick straps with eager fingers. A rising sense of ecstasy flowed through her body as she straightened and stood a moment in the darkness. The wind played with her hair, blew gently, coolly against her cheeks like a

physical caress. The crest of the hill was a dark mound above her and the shadows of the trees moved back and forth in their play. Lightheartedly she wandered along the hilltop away from the cluster of tents, threading her way in darkness through a grove of trees, circling a group of rustling bushes to come out at last on the bare rise at the top of the hill. Below the valley stretched away in darkness and she could visualize the rise of farther hills and, beyond that, another valley and so across the earth.

Suddenly, to the east, faint flashes of artillery played low and irregularly on the horizon, outlining for seconds at a time the intervening hills and trees, then leaving the night again to broken snatches of darkness. Under that, her joy evaporated as she thought of men being killed in the fraction of an instant, and of others lying badly wounded, watching their own artillery pattern the sky with beauty. Out there they drag their shattered limbs and torn bodies, lie moaning, intestines ripped from their bellies, or crawl screaming, broken heads held tightly, trying to hold out the blinding heave of pain. And out there somewhere, bearers carry litters into blacked-out tents to lie crowded side by side in the smoky dusk-like hospitals, and streams of blood drip and make it slippery under foot. Over there, under the lights, in stinking hot surgeries, other nurses and surgeons and technicians are sweating over their tables while I . . . while I . . . she thought with sudden stinging pain, a strange unbearable longing, while I am here, safe on this cool hill, as far away and safe from that night down there, as untouched and unmoved by that artillery, as if I were one of those in the cemetery on that lower hill.

All her great bursting joy was gone and in its stead came crowding the old hopelessness and despair and, defeated now, she threw herself face down in the cool moving grass and wept. Unrestrained, unheard, unheeded human tears fell as dew among the dancing grasses and the sound of sobbing was lost upon the careless wind. God knows, she thought numbly, there's nothing to cry for. God knows there is nothing.

With a forlorn last sigh she rolled over on her back and let the cool wind whisper past her face and her eyes rest gratefully on the wide unfathomable space and unlimited time that stood between her and the stars. Somehow these infinite minutes and hours that stretched away through billions of miles and years seemed reassuring. The wind rustled in the bushes, the trees whipped slowly across the sky and their leaves kept up a steady

chant, while to the east the rumble of the guns continued as a low mutter and complaint. A small animal suddenly squeaked its fear of the night and, quite abruptly, she relaxed and slept.

CHAPTER 14

Lieutenant William Stainer borrowed one of the company jeeps and, after many inquiries, established the approximate location of the First Platoon. With a light heart and a queer sense of release, he turned the jeep uphill, taking the rutted road with such speed that the jeep's violent bouncing seemed one step removed from flying. Twenty minutes later he saw the tents, their red crosses dulled by mud and wear, scattered beneath the trees along the hilltop. As he parked the jeep near the neatly marked headquarters tent he thought of the evening many weeks before and his heart quickened, his body felt taut and hard.

"Where would I find Lieutenant Caine?" he asked an enlisted man sitting at a battered field desk just inside the open tent flap.

"The Nurses' Tent is over there, to the right, sir," the young corpsman replied, moving out from behind his desk to point out the tent standing by itself further along the hill. His eyes checked Stainer curiously.

"Thanks," the latter said, conscious of the interest he had aroused and he grinned as he walked swiftly away. Am I courting? he asked himself, then sobered with an inward nod. God yes! Had he even been able to think coherently of anything else! In a way it had helped ease the dull agony of his return to the lines and in a way it had made things much worse, adding a poignant longing, a painful desire to live long enough for this. Even now, as he strode along the hill his imagination piled up the scene of meeting, mingling a feverish possibility of hope and unease for he did not know what to expect, or even what he wanted to expect.

Then he found her, bent over a pail of water among the ropes of the tent.

"Hey! Lee!" he exclaimed half a dozen feet away.

She straightened slowly, wringing out heavy coveralls, and stared at him across the intervening space.

"God, I'm glad to see you!" he cried coming to a halt on the other side of her pail.

Her gaze left him, she stared down helplessly at her wet soapy hands, then looked up again. "Hello," she said at last and was shamed by the uncertainty in her voice. In spite of the hasty notes that had promised he would come she had not considered the possibility of ever seeing him again.

He didn't notice her hesitation. He stood staring at her with bemused eyes, a broad grin across his handsome mouth. To him she seemed like a sturdy child in her belted coveralls, the sleeves rolled above the elbow, the pants legs rolled above the knee, and the sun bright on her cropped hair. She looked very young and tanned and healthy until he noted the shadows beneath her eyes, the look of strain around her mouth.

"God, I'm glad to see you!" he repeated.

She smiled a trifle doubtfully and turned to hang the dripping coveralls over a tent rope, then slowly wiped her soapy hands along her thighs. Part of her mind cautioned: you're getting in too deep, you'll end up having to explain everything and that won't be easy! If you're not deaf and blind listen to what's in his voice and see what's in his eyes! But another part of her mind cried gaily: why not! My God, why not! Flirt and forget it. Be female for a week and why worry. One week . . . and no more.

"Can you come swimming?" he asked. "I've found a place . . . away from the mob and good and deep!"

She nodded. "Yes. I'd love to. I haven't been swimming for ages!" One week, she told herself. One week to do as I please.

For a week she did exactly that and was quite happy. Together, they swam in the river; together explored its banks, following the continuous S of its passage through green meadows and planted fields, past worn walls that guided its lazy passage through country villages, strolled over an arched bridge of stone where statues of long-dead bishops leaned broodingly from protecting niches, their faces pitted and worn flat by the years. They lay on the green banks and watched the water bugs flip over the brown water, making light tinkling sounds as they went, while at their backs the crickets droned in hot fields and high on a hill a farmer called to his team, his heavy cry drifting down to them on a drowsy wind. They climbed the hills above Thiaucourt and wandered through the slowly turning woods. They discovered country lanes lovely

beyond thought and found farmhouses hidden in fissures of the land. They joined the others in the evenings on the hillside and listened to them singing, and heard, between songs, the faroff tinkle of mess gear along the river, the distant blast of a whistle, the more distant rumble of artillery to the east.

" 'Rollll me overrr in the cloverrr, lay me down and do it again!' " The boisterous voices trailing off to echo a little sadly in the dusk, a little forlorn and lonely along the hill.

Time that fled so swiftly made one like that, a little nostalgic, a little weary, a little sad; yet, they were happy enough. They drank the bitter red wine of the country with their C-rations. They spoke a great deal of home and never of the war. And each night the moon would rise, unreal and aloof, over the eastern hills to bring them beauty and the terrible pangs of beauty, a blend of homesickness and the knowledge of death and the passionate longing for love. At one moment they might be quiet, thoughtful, turned inward, and the next shouting in drunken glee, driven by a deep-seated restlessness and a sense of unease for the vagueness of their future. Like the others, Lee and Bill Stainer were shaken by conflicting emotions and it wasn't long before she realized that the time for flirting had passed; they were beyond that.

Suddenly, it was the end of the week, the last night, and on the morrow the division would return to the line, the First Platoon following to set up once more in their rear.

Stainer came up that night with a jeep to take her down to a party in the village. "Just some of us from the regiment," he said, "just a last wingding to keep us going for a while."

"It's not very prepossessing," he apologized later when they'd parked the jeep in the innyard.

The café was a long, low stone building with the usual pile of manure standing off to one side of the court. The moon shone on the cobblestones forming pits of shadow like pools of water across the yard. In the deep door well he paused, feeling for the heavy wooden latch.

"Here, duck in, honey." He shoved the door inward against the wall revealing a dark corridor, narrow and low-ceilinged and lit only by a faint light filtering beneath a further door. She ducked beneath his outstretched arm and he followed, pulling the outer door to and stepping close behind her.

"Damned funny to have to worry about blackout back here but the town's full of Third Army MPs just waiting to spoil a

gravel-pusher's fun!" he said, placing both hands upon her waist to guide her along the dark hall.

"It's black enough in here even for them," she murmured, instantly conscious of his hands on her body. A shiver ran along her nerves. In a passionately clear vision she recalled the high silvered hill they had just left, the dark and light patterns moving above the road, coming between herself and the moon, and the wild rush of cool wind around the windshield of the jeep. A deep instinctive yearning moved her to whisper, "It's all of it for us on this last night . . ." but shouting voices and a strange thin music floating out to them drowned her faint words. He reached around her to shove open a second door.

A thunderous clashing of male voices rolled over them. Music whirled and seeped through laughter and shouted curses, thin crying music as erotic as yearning in the night. For a second she hesitated on the threshold of the dimly lit and crowded room. Soldiers pushed and shoved together at small round tables loaded to capacity with glasses and dusty green bottles. Cigarette smoke floated thickly through the room adding to the murk, and the only light was shed by dozens of flickering candles stuck in moldy wax-covered bottles on the tables.

"It's all right. Go on," he whispered, his hand firm on her arm.

As she stepped down the two steps into the room the noise beat about her ears like a storm. Wild laughter broke on all sides, harsh and obscene voices called out and mingled with the click and tinkle of glasses while the thin lashing notes of violins unevenly penetrated the general din.

"There they are, over there," he shouted into her ear, pointing out a table in the far corner beneath the shuttered windows. With hands still warm and tight against her waist he steered her through the shouting, drinking mob of uniformed men, past tables where men sat tipsily, raising sweaty red faces to watch her pass. In spite of months of similar experiences she could not help an involuntary shudder as she saw their hungry, haunted eyes, the loosening of their lips and the hard intensity of their stares, nor help hearing the half-whispered comments.

"Don't mind," Stainer said in her ear. "It's their last night to howl, poor devils!" and with reassuring hands pushed her on.

She nodded but was relieved nonetheless when they came to a halt at the table in the corner.

"Hi there, Bill!" A tilted chair came to the floor with a crash and a tall, raw-boned lieutenant rose to his feet. "My God, gentlemen," he cried, "a lady! A lady lieutenant! On your feet, men, a beautiful lady lieutenant!"

As one man they rose to their feet, eagerly pushing and shoving like a group of small boys at a party when the cake and ice cream is announced.

"Hello! Hello! Helloooo!"

"Bill, you goddam old goat! Uh, pardon me, ma'am, but he didn't tell us. . . ."

"A friend, you said!"

"Sit here, Miss . . . ah, Lieutenant."

"Hey, not so fast. Let the lady sit any damn place she pleases! Like over here, Lieutenant."

"Another bottle of cognac!"

The eager laughing voices surged around her. Confused and a bit embarrassed she sank into the nearest empty chair, glad to retire from the limelight at last. She found herself gazing up from one grinning face to another, turning to laugh, smile, answer the dozen questions fired all at once only to have others come between, interrupting the first.

Finally, giving up, she laughed aloud, delighted with them all, and then as if at a signal they surged together, yanked out their chairs to resume their seats. They all leaned forward, elbows on the table, flushed faces turned in her direction.

At first glance she found them astonishingly alike with their clipped military haircuts and tanned shaven faces in which burned the feverish eyes of men who have seen combat. Most of them wore heavy 45s strapped to their lean waists but two sported shoulder holsters and German P-38s. Except for these two who were captains, the group were all young lieutenants. Very young, she thought, as she gazed at them in the uncertain light of the single candle in the table's center. Its mellow light enhanced their look of youth and the shadow of strain hovering in their alcohol-bright eyes.

These are the men of the roads, she thought, seeing their eyes even as their teeth flashed in delighted grins. Tomorrow they all go back and the next day some of them . . . but I mustn't think like this, she warned herself. Tomorrow was another day, after all, while this was a . . . a party.

"Gentlemen, let's drink to Lee!" the big young captain on her left shouted, and for a minute the table bustled and

clanked with the pouring of drinks, the passing of bottles. Then they raised their glasses to her and drained them dry.

"And now, Lee, what sumptuous repast shall we offer you?"

She was aware then of the presence at her shoulder. Twisting a little in her chair she found the rather awesome-looking patroness of the café waiting patiently behind her. The woman's rough work-reddened hands were folded in an attitude of dignity upon the dirty gray muslin apron that she wore over the traditionally severe black dress of the matron. Her graying hair was gathered untidily at the back of her fat and pallid neck, and her equally pale face gleamed with sweat in the smoky light. Greasy, the girl thought with a faint queasiness, but was shamed as her eyes dropped back to the worn hands folded so resignedly on the shapeless body.

Lieutenant Culver grinned up at the severe face disarmingly, saluting the patroness with gallantry. *"Madame,"* he pronounced in a courtly tone, his brief display of GI French made grotesque by his hard Yankee drawl, *"Ah, Madame, bonjour. Bonjour. Nous voulons les . . . ah . . . petits diners. Compris? Nous vo . . . uh . . ."*

"Oui, Monsieur."

"Well, what do you fellows want?"

"Eggs, Johnny, tell her eggs."

"Are we swapping cigarettes?"

"Okay, eggs it is. Madame, *nous voulons les* . . . hell, what's eggs?"

"Johnny, more cognac! *Calvados! Beaucoup calvados!"*

The chorus rose around the table engulfing both the imperturbable patroness and the hapless interpreter. The latter moved his hands about helplessly.

"Des oeufs," he said with difficulty. *"Beaucoup des oeufs et calvados. Beaucoup, beaucoup calvados et cognac. Compris? Et vite! Vite!"*

The woman replied unsmiling and stern, the English words dropping in odd disarray before the surprised men, "Yes. *Oui,* sir. I will bring as you wish. Omelet and calvados, no? For each I bring the omelet, yes? For each I bring calvados? I understand. For each, sir, thirty francs, ten cigarettes." She inclined her head gravely and pushed away from the table, waddling with amazing dexterity and speed across the crowded room. Behind her she left delighted laughter and Lieutenant Culver scratching his head.

"Can you beat that? Perfect English!"

Just then a howl rose from the tables near the door. Startled, Lee turned in time to see half a dozen French girls come crowding through the door shepherded by as many sheepish-looking soldiers. As the girls paused on the steps wolf calls broke and shattered from a hundred throats, short yelps and drawn-out howls that hung like weird laughter in the room.

Undisturbed, the girls swaggered down the steps and ignoring the outstretched hands, the suddenly excited faces, they minced through the room, rolling their plump hips with insolence, their dark young faces absolutely expressionless. All six were dark and small and plump and only one was even remotely pretty. In the subdued light their faces were hard voluptuous masks of powder and rouge and thick gleaming lipstick smeared like a coating of fat over their pouting mouths. The further they advanced into the room the more obvious it was that they wore next to nothing beneath the flimsy print stuff of their dresses. Their breasts jumped and jiggled with every step and their round buttocks bounced gently under the sleazy material. The wolf calls rose to primitive howls as dozens of men leaped to their feet, trying to deflect the girls to their own tables. Red sweating faces leered intently, hungry eyes stroked the jiggling breasts and round abdomens of the advancing women. And insolently, indifferently, the six walked among them to arrive at last at the table indicated by their now blushing escorts. Here they seated themselves with an extra bounce, an additional jiggle, with dresses pulled tightly across their behinds, the better not to wrinkle.

"My God!" Lee breathed.

Culver laughed. *"Les femmes!"* he said, grinning. "Some of the boys went cherchey *les femmes* and got results!" He shook his head helplessly, a bemused look on his young face.

"That's my company!" Captain Rand exclaimed, striking his hand to his head in mock despair. "We'll have to have bed-check tonight for sure! No telling what we'll find in their pup tents this night!"

A small waiter, with hair gleaming like patent leather, arrived to divert their attention. He scurried about the table with a loaded tray and was followed by two more almost identical garçons who were only a little more poorly dressed and with, possibly, filthier aprons over their coarse black trousers.

"Wine here," Stainer said and a single small bottle was set before Lee. *"Calvados voilà!"* He waved expansively to indi-

cate the rest of the table and five dusty bottles were deposited at random to be instantly seized and passed about until all glasses were filled again.

Johnny Culver rose. "A proper toast, gentlemen!" He held his glass to the candlelight waiting for the others to rise, then he turned gravely to Lee. "Here's to your corps, Lee! Here's to the Army Nurse Corps! Merciful angels! And here's to you . . ." He lifted his glass to his lips speaking over the rim with merry eyes, "Here's to you, Lee, the epitome of all the great, gorgeous but deplorably absent American girls!"

They laughed with him and tossed off half their drinks.

"Wait though," Culver shouted as they moved to resume their seats. "Wait! I've got one more. The last of the evening. Here's to the war! Gentlemen, to the war. Our war and may it die damned quickly!" Again, he tilted his glass. The others followed suit silently, their rosy, sweat-polished faces gone grave.

Of course, to the war waiting tomorrow for them all. Who could forget? Even in calvados, drowning in calvados, who could forget?

Across the room someone started to sing. One table began it, and within a few minutes the others had taken it up and the whole room shouted and roared.

" 'I've got sixpence, jolly jolly sixpence. Twopence to lend, twopence to spend and twopence to send home to my wife, poorrrrr wife' " Lilting, wistful, joyous. " 'As we go rolling, rolling home.' "

Beating time with their feet, broad grins on sweating faces, they half sang, half shouted the soldier's homesick words.

" 'Rolling home, rolling home . . . by the light of the silvery moooon!' "

And someone else started even before the last words of the first song had died away . . . " 'Rolll me over in the clover . . .' " Shouting the bawdy song at the top of their voices. " 'Rollllll me overrr in the cloverrrr, lay me down and do it again,' " lewd as Piccadilly Circus after midnight, lonely and forlorn as soldiers marching down a quay at dawn, yearning as ship smoke rising beyond a heavy horizon. " 'Rollllll me overrrrr . . .' " shouted the chorus of nostalgic voices. Aw take me back to Piccadilly, take me back to English shores. And further still, across the ocean to the States . . . ah, the States. " 'Oh they say that in the army, the coffee's mighty fine. . . . Oh I don't want no more of army life, Gee Mom,

oh Mom, I just wanna go home. . . . Aw, take me back to Brooklyn, down by Coney Island, on the wheat fields of the prairies and Chicago's Stoney Island . . . oh Mom, how I wanna come home!' "

As suddenly as it began the singing died away. An unnatural almost reverent silence descended over the room to be broken in a moment by renewed laughter and drunken shouts and the inevitable foul cursing.

The black-gowned patroness emerged from the gloom shepherding two more sallow garçons heavily burdened with trays of food. French omelet for seventeen! The big hot plates were handed around with difficulty. They all pushed together to make room and helpfully ducked heads. Once the confusion had subsided they fell like ravening wolves upon the golden steaming omelets, the thick slices of unleavened black bread thinly spread with fresh unsalted butter. Bottles of red wine temporarily superseded the heavier cognac and glasses gleamed ruby in the candlelight as they were passed about.

"Having fun, sweet?"

"Oh yes. This is wonderful!"

While they ate the three violins began to play again in the far corner of the room, the thread-like tones wailing seductive love ballads.

"How about some boogie?" someone shouted.

At once, a group of men began clearing a space in the center of the room. The six dark girls materialized suddenly to the accompaniment of repeated howls. Other girls emerged from somewhere among the massed soldiers and soon the floor was crowded with an eager stag line forming at its edges. The room shook faintly with the stamp of feet and, impossibly, the bedlam seemed to increase as the music whirled and wailed, strange music, oddly appealing and as sensuous as anything Lee had ever heard.

"More wine?" Culver held the bottle suspended over her glass.

"Yes, thanks," though she knew that the wine had gone swiftly to her head. It seemed to sparkle in her body, run red and heady just beneath the surface of her skin and like the points of flame flickering about the room, it danced and wavered through her.

"Bill, watch me, I'm getting tight!"

"That's like asking the dog to watch the cat to watch the canary! I'm already very tight, my sweet."

"Where you from, Lee?" someone asked.

"Colorado," she heard herself reply and her moving lips felt fuzzy and queer. It was hard to form the words. Oh my, she thought, wanting to laugh aloud, I'm drunk!

"Let's dance," Stainer whispered and somehow she was on her feet, the men half rising about her, and then the two of them were pushing through the crush. With difficulty they finally reached the cleared space and, turning, she moved into his arms. Just beyond his shoulders a flushed face hovered, glassy eyes staring straight into hers, then Bill's body blotted out the drunken features as they moved together and away.

She was keenly aware of him, of his body against her own, of the music beating upon her ears and mingling with the fiery wine in the pulse and throb of her blood to set her whole being tingling with a nameless excitement. Fascinated she stared as one of the French girls danced step by step beside them for a moment. The dark, rather hairy face, with its plump cheeks and full moist lips, glistened in the dim light. There was something of the flesh-eating flower about this oily mouth, she thought, something of the carrion-eating bird about the dark hooded eyes accented beyond reality with mascara.

This face, too, disappeared beyond Bill's shoulder. The music and alcohol took possession of her mind and body, and she found herself dancing with a jungle rhythm, a primitive urge drawing her languorously through the steps; it seemed to her that she could hear the throbbing of faint drums. A wave of recklessness seized her. She abandoned herself to the moment for this was the last hour before tomorrow. And for what should she care? She forgot her young husband, she forgot the war as the music pulled at her, sending the blood hammering through her body, and she was a stranger to herself and held within the circle of a stranger's arms.

As the music rose higher and higher in an insistent cry, her breath caught in her throat and she moved closer to him as around them the moving bodies quickened, the men's faces grew more bold and the girls' heads sank back, revealing parted lips and eyes that gleamed knowingly beneath heavy lowered lids. The sensuous pulse of the thin, all but unbearable music surged through the room; faster, faster and higher, seeking, demanding, asking and suggesting until, abruptly it faltered, broke and sighed away. A deep intangible murmur rose among the men.

"My God," Stainer whispered, "what are they trying to do to us!" He held her against him for an instant more.

"It was sexy, wasn't it?"

"Christ, its weird! Must be what they mean when they call something 'French.' If so, these people must lead quite a life! Well," he sighed regretfully, loosening his arms and guiding her from the floor, "I guess we should . . ."

"Hey, Bill, you can't expect a monopoly, boy! Sorry, Lieutenant, but I'm about to steal your girl!" Johnny Culver pushed between them, taking Lee by the arm and whirling her gently back onto the dance floor. When the music paused again there was someone to take his place and after that someone else, and on and on until her breath came in gasps and her feet burned. A great exhilaration filled her and she was intensely happy as she whirled with one and another over the crowded floor until Stainer retrieved her at last, whispering,

"Shall we go?"

She sighed, suddenly conscious of her aching legs. The wild reckless joy drained slowly away, leaving her spent and weary yet content. The music had subtly altered in meaning, the tempo slowed and she was grateful to be held close, the awareness of elusive beauty and elusive life like a pain through her heart.

"Yes, let's go, Bill."

They made their good-bys to a storm of protest and banter and then threaded their way back through the crowd to the black narrow hall. A moment later they stepped out into the cool night. Fresh air washed over their hot cheeks and gratefully she raised her flushed face to the wind even though she shivered in her over-warm blouse.

A deep penetrating gloom had crept down the streets of the village and settled over the hills but high in the east a strange glow appeared behind a moving bank of clouds, and even as they stood there on the café steps it broadened and increased in strength. Behind them the laughter and the shouting echoed unreal and seemingly far away, lost somewhere in an almost mythical, smoke-hung, candlelit room where the thin thready music held sway, half-heard now, seeping through the heavily shuttered windows. The music ceased and they heard the sound of singing again, muffled at first but growing louder until a few words drifted distinctly to their ears.

" '. . . poor little sheep who have gone astray,
Baaaaaaaa baaaaaaaaa baaaaaa. . . .' "

Just then the moon emerged from the obscuring clouds and burst like a huge silver lamp over the hills.

They stood transfixed. This sudden terrible nocturnal beauty mingled with the sound of distant, wistful voices filled with the intangible sadness of this last night, drove a dagger deep into their hearts. After all, they were as nothing here, they were all as nothing here; transient, pitiful and very small with death following in their footsteps and breathing foully down their necks. In this silvered night there was nothing beyond this moment sweet with frightful beauty and fraught with its own impermanence, and with theirs.

His hand closed on hers and she turned to look up into his shadowed face.

"Yes. Let's go quickly. There is so little time." She hadn't meant to say it; she didn't exactly understand why she had, but she knew that she meant just that. There was so little time, even in beauty there was so little time.

He did not answer but drew her down the steps to the jeep. They drove out of the café yard into the shining, cobbled streets stretching like ribbons of silver foil between the dark shadows of the buildings. He drove swiftly, swinging the jeep around tight corners until they left the town and moved along a country lane that led upward along the hillside toward the hospital platoon.

Lee sat back and watched the swift dark pattern of the trees flow by overhead and let the sweet night air brush through her short hair. The river lay shrouded in mist like the ghost of a huge snake-like monster on the valley floor. Diffused fog coiled over the meadows and now and then streamers of mist slipped noiselessly across the road to swallow the jeep momentarily. Then they swung right onto a rough dirt lane and rose quickly toward the silver crests of the hills. Looking back, she saw the cotton-wrapped river flowing away in the distance and the moon shining on the roofs of the village. The restless trees beside the lane gleamed in the moonlight like polished metal, the wind-touched bushes sparkled and danced.

It's so lovely, she thought with aching heart.

Suddenly the jeep came to a halt. Her heart lurched, began to pound. She glanced at him from the corner of her eye, and seeing his face, slipped wordlessly from her seat to run along the hill, her feet moving lightly through the silver, dipping grass. The wind brushed coolly past her face, the bright

sky whispered and the dark hillcrest with its shining crown of trees bent down to meet her. Why not? she thought, oh why not?

Behind, came the soft thud of following feet to send a panicky thrill through her body. She ran faster, filled with a wild elation.

Just as she reached the hilltop and the shadow of the trees, she stumbled and fell face forward into the grass, to lie there panting and laughing as he flung himself beside her and reached to draw her close. Their lips met and clung, his hands moved gently over her breathless body, hands that were warm and insistent. Under their urgent touch her body came alive, half-rising to meet him.

The wind stirred the grass, swept cool and clean over their desire-strung bodies. For a long time she lay listening to its whisper, her bare arms flung above her head, naked breasts tipped whitely by the moonlight. She sighed and watched the black, slender stalks of grass move fitfully back and forth with a vague wondering pleasure, felt their wispy scratch beneath her naked back and the coarse weave of her own blouse beneath her cheek. Part of her mind lay slumberous and languid while another part ticked with small irregular thoughts. I did that, now it's over. It doesn't mean anything, yet it means everything. Why? But what does it matter why, for I don't care. Not any more.

He lay quietly beside her, cheek pillowed on his arm and watched her. He couldn't hear the small whispers of her thought but he felt he understood the stillness of her face and he was uneasy. With a sigh he bent his head and kissed her shoulder, his lips lingering.

"Darling, I hope you're not sorry. . . ."

Startled, she glanced sideways as he raised his head and saw the dark question in his eyes.

"No. Oh no. It's not that. . . ." her voice trailed off. There was no use trying to explain now.

He smiled, relieved and lowered his head again to her arm. For many minutes they lay quietly feeling the night wind wander, cool and fresh, over their skin and the beat of their hearts slow as the fire died away in the dark streams of their blood and out of the thousand nerve fibers of their being. Lee shivered. It was cold. . . .

Finally she sat up, loath to move, but her teeth were chattering. "Bill, I'm getting awfully cold."

He stirred and sat up to help her, then drew her shivering body against his and together they sat looking out across the valley where the moon reached down among the crosses of the dead, reached down to touch them with a sterile whiteness that made the long rows as strange and startling against the blackness of the lower valley as the white of bones turned up in black earth.

Never again, she thought, will they feel this ecstasy, for they are men lost to the supreme silent moments of beauty, the wind-tossed grass, the high-topped hills, the night and silence and faraway calls, the moon sudden and translucent across the world. Under that black fold of meadow they lie, men whose lives fled as briefly across the earth's face as the clouds shredding so swiftly across the eye of the moon to race off across the sky and be lost . . . somewhere. To what haven in time and space, to what far shelter of the universe had they crept, and to what silent graveyard of hope had crept the meaning of their deaths?

It was strange to think that they, too, might have climbed these hills and sat, perhaps, as she and Bill did now to watch the moon rise and turn with the earth and feel the winds blow up from the valley floor and see the white ghosts of the river dance across the fields! It was strange to think that they had walked and loved and fought and, in the end, died somewhere down there where the grass was like the waves of the sea! Somewhere here their bodies had once lain torn and bloated in the sun while living men came to shovel their remains into this earth, to abandon them for all time, never again to leave these fields, never to hear the final shot, the last order read, the voices shouting out the news of armistice and the rumors of the long voyage home. Ah, she thought, how strange and how forlorn!

The wind's song was lonely now; the valley, now shadowed by a cloud across the moon, dark and forbidding, and the days seemed to stretch away lost and endless and meaningless in time. She stared down hearing again the soft closing of the final door, seeing again the dark mounds scattered so freely across the world.

"What are you thinking?" Stainer asked softly as she shivered against him.

"I was thinking how strange that they . . ." she stopped for he was one of them, perhaps. And she closed her mind as she

would clench her fists. She could not think that he, that his hard young body would be as those below. . . .

"What?" he asked.

She only shook her head and placed a finger across his lips.

"It's so unearthly beautiful! It's really as if there were only tonight left, as if the world would end tomorrow," she said at last, her voice small in the pull of the wind.

He pulled her gently back against the dark swell of earth. "Listen, my darling, it's the most beautiful night of my life!" he whispered. "I'll never forget . . . never."

"And I . . ." she began but her tongue faltered, stumbled. That wasn't true. God knows that wasn't true! She remembered with a savage surge of emotion the young love that had seemed the very climax of her life, and she was sickened with the realization that she had almost betrayed with her mind as easily as she had betrayed with her body. Almost! It was as though a great eraser had wiped the slate of the past clean, leaving only a powdery trace of what had been, of what had once mattered so terribly.

It seemed now but the trace of a dream. . . .

Stainer did not notice her hesitation but went on, his voice moody, at once bitter and intense. "If I only knew what was beyond this night, if I could plan anything . . . but it's like tempting fate even to think ahead. It . . . well, I don't know. I only know what I want. Lee. Lee, will you marry me?" He waited, the wind quite strong now, breathing between them like an invisible wall. He waited and the gap was long.

She was thinking, I must tell him. No, I can't. Not tonight. Especially, not tonight. Oh coward, coward! Why was I such a coward, such a fool! Why am I now!

In the end she only said, "We can't talk about that now, not tonight, Bill. We can't, you know. We should only say that we . . . that we love and not anything more, not tonight."

He drew her against him hard. "I want you to know. I want you to know more than anything else on earth! That's all. If you know, Lee . . ."

"I know," she replied and touched his cheek.

Whatever else, she thought, I'll remember that for one night I lived in this damned wasteland, for one night I was human enough to love and I'll know that I didn't completely die. Tomorrow . . . I'll . . . But the word "tomorrow" echoed hugely, hollowly, coldly through her brain. Tomorrow! To-

morrow they'd go down, he and she, and all of them, down into the void of waste and slaughter and the never-ending horror of war. What would happen then to love? Where would feeling and hope and passion go? Nowhere, to nothing.

Faraway a dog barked and they were both aware suddenly that it was almost dawn. Wordlessly they rose and together walked through the moon-drenched woods and down the grassy slope dancing in the light, and not far from the tents they paused, kissed and parted, each instinctively shrinking away from the hurt of caring that the other walked away to loneliness and fear again and each knowing in a vague way that it might be the last time they would meet, yet each clutching at the everyday words.

"I'll write you from the company. Just don't look for too many letters, darling. I guess we'll be busy."

"Yes, please write. I'll answer. I promise I will."

She stood on the hill alone and watched him go, watched until his dark figure with trailing shadow had disappeared beyond the bushes that marked the road. A moment later she heard the jeep motor start, saw the blue lights sweep around, shining dimly an instant through the black filigree of the leaves and within a moment more there was nothing left, no sight, no sound.

Loneliness overwhelmed her. Close to tears, sniffling a little like a child, she started toward the tents. Something moved among the shadows as she passed the kitchen tent; a figure detached itself and lurched across her path.

"Lee! For God's sake, what in hell are you doing out here? Hey, wait a minute."

"No. You're drunk," she whispered, staring at his moon-white, ravaged face.

"There you go again, you goddam little puritan! No, not drunk, just happy for a goddam change! C'mere, I wanna talk to you, baby. Have a drink with me, huh? Last chance for a little drink. Good stuff. Cognac, best ever I got out of that old bastard, Simons! C'mon, sweetheart, I won't bite."

"No. It's late. I'll see you in the morning, Ed," she replied in a low voice, moving to pass him.

"For Christ's sake don't be so snotty!" he cried furiously. "Where you been you start worrying about how late it is now! Aw, c'mon Lee . . ." The anger died suddenly from his voice and he turned maudlin, unnerving her. "I'm so goddam lonely. Please, just a minute or two . . . My God, if you knew how

much I hate to go back to that hell of a Surgery! If you knew how damn close to going AWOL I am. . . ."

She hesitated, touched by pity. Her own happiness had already evaporated as if it had never existed, the secret mood of tenderness and passion was spent, lost before the resurgence of her own loneliness, and now, the sight of his thin exhausted face . . . still, Ed was drunk and when drunk, difficult. With the memory of other times, she said softly, "Let's wait until tomorrow, Ed. It's almost morning and I'm tired. . . ."

"If you knew . . ." he repeated sullenly, ignoring her plea, "if you knew how damn lonely I am you'd have it in your heart—you have got a heart, haven't you, baby?—to make like a woman, a nice sympathetic female to listen to my troubles. That's all the hell I want . . . a nice sympathetic female." He dropped her arm suddenly and half-turned away.

She started past him again, then stopped, hesitating. After all, she thought in confusion, this is Ed, this is my friend. In his way he is as defeated and lonely as any man out here. The least I can do is listen. . . . And in perplexity and pity she blurted, "Oh, all right. A few minutes, Ed. Where shall we go?"

"C'mon, my tent. Right here," he made a clumsy half bow and ushered her through the open flap into the dimly lit tent. "Sit here." With elaborate concern he seated her on a camp stool by the opening and then turned to fumble through his duffle bag. "Now where in hell?" he burst out irritably, his voice gone ugly again. "Ah, here it is, my little pacifier. Come and show the pretty lady." He raised the bottle of cognac to the light, turning it slowly to admire the liquid's amber glow. "Lovely! Lovely! Wanna use my precious little glass, sweetheart? It's around here somewhere. Damn well know it is . . ."

"Never mind, Ed," she said quickly as he stumbled among his things, pulling clothes out of his duffle bag and throwing them on the ground. "Oh please, I'll take it straight. I only want a sip. Please."

"Okay, sweetheart. Whatever you say is okay with me. Ladies first. Down the hatch, baby!" He handed her the thick bottle and stood before her, hands on hips, swaying slightly on his feet, a thin smile twisting his lips. His pale unshaven face glistened with sweat.

For a second she hesitated. Maybe I ought to get out of here, she thought a little wildly. Have I done something stupid again?

But he only stood there quietly with his odd faint smile as

though waiting for her to finish with his bottle. He even stretched out his hand with a faint eagerness.

No, this is the man I've admired for months, this is my surgeon and he's as weary and lonely and lost as anyone else. One drink to him then and I'll ease away. . . . She tilted the bottle swiftly, taking a hasty swallow only to regret it as the powerful liquor burned all the way down her throat, bringing tears to her eyes.

"Oh, damn it!" she coughed and spluttered and blindly handed the bottle back to him. She wiped her streaming eyes and swallowed hard.

Collier threw back his head and laughed uproariously.

"Hey, you gotta be careful with this stuff. It's dynamite. Look, here's the way you drink this poison. Watch an old hand." He raised the bottle to his lips, tipping it slowly to allow the fiery liquid to drain easily into his mouth, swallowing it little by little.

For several minutes that seemed like hours to her, he held the bottle to his mouth, and when he lowered it at last the level of the cognac was visibly less. She grew uneasy again and glanced toward the open flap. Dawn was streaking the sky. Morning, she thought and stirred restlessly. We move in only a few hours.

"See! That's the way it's done. That's the way the Frenchies drink. Here, try again."

"No thanks. No more for me. I've got to go, Ed. I'd like to get just a few hours . . ."

"You keep saying that like a goddam parrot! What's the matter with you anyway? We used to be friends, you used to kind of like me, didn't you, baby?" he cocked his head at her, his dark eyes bright with anger.

"I still do. That hasn't anything to do with wanting a few hours of sleep. Anyway, you know I don't drink very much." She stood up and smoothed the edges of her blouse nervously.

"Afraid of me? That's it, isn't it? You're afraid of me. You been out all night and now you want to hurry off and get some sleep and because you think I'm drunk you go a little pale around the gills. Or maybe it's just because I'm not good enough for you now. Have to have a good-looking young fellow, a kid lieutenant these days, eh?"

She started around him toward the flap, her anger drowning pity for his ashen face and trembling hands, and eyes shadowed by something very like fear.

"What'cha getting so mad about? It's true, isn't it? You fol-

lowed my advice, didn't you? You've already . . ." he paused, grinning, blocking her way but the expression of his face was oddly strained.

"I'm going, Ed," she said as calmly as she could. "We can talk about it later." And again she tried to push past him.

"No. Listen, Lee, if you've already slept with him, relax. It didn't last very long, that dear Robert guff, did it? And why should it out here? Nothing does if you're human, and you're human, aren't you, baby? Just as human as I've said you were all along but young . . . so damned young."

"God damn you!" she cried. Her body shook with anger but a cold spot spread about her heart.

"C'mon, Lee, sweetheart," he whispered, his hands on her shoulders. His face was so close that the rank, stale whisky on his breath almost suffocated her. "Let's not pretend any longer, let's not be so young. How about spreading those favors over more of unfortunate mankind?" He laughed harshly, his hot breath beating against her face, bringing a fierce wild fury mounting through her brain. She wrenched free of his hands and struck him across the face with all her strength, struck with every intention of hurting, of wiping away the bitter edge of his mockery and of her own shame.

Startled, he loosened his grip and she stepped back and deliberately struck again, seeing with sadistic satisfaction the white unshaven skin redden beneath her hand. Then she rushed past him, avoiding his clumsily reaching hands and ran out of the tent into the windy morning. As from a great distance she heard his voice crying after her,

"You bitch! You goddam little bitch!"

She ran on across the field, stumbling a little, her breath heaving in anger in her chest. Her whole body was taut and quivering with rage and she knew that at this moment she would have found pleasure in killing, could have easily crushed those sneering insinuating lips and brought blood to his pallid, leering face.

"Oh God!" she whispered, "Oh God!"

At the Nurses' Tent she paused just outside the flap to catch her breath and calm the shaking of her body. Then she ducked inside and stood listening a moment. They were all asleep. The dark tent was filled with the noise of regular breathing, the occasional snore or groan. Hurriedly, she stepped out of her clothes, wanting above all else to gain the warm close shelter

of her sleeping bag, wanting to bury her head in her arms and weep it all away, the scorn, the shame . . . the guilt.

The cool night wind breathed against her naked body as she stripped, and exhausted, angry, frightened as she was, a deep wellspring of life stirred within her at its touch. She drew a long shaky breath; Collier's leering face receded and in its stead sprang the intense blue eyes, the sullen boyish features of Stainer. A shiver rippled along her skin and with a deep sigh, a rueful smile, she slid into her bag, turning over on her stomach to rest her hot face in her hands. For a long time she lay there, tense, not weeping, hardly thinking. She was only tired now and all that she waited for was sleep, sleep and the absence of all feeling.

CHAPTER 15

Tomorrow was there!

It dawned, the fourth of October, on a chill blast of wind and rain, touched by the cold hand of coming winter. The X Division moved back into the line now about thirty miles east of the Moselle River in sodden, battered Lorraine. The long clear days of September were transformed to the short gray days of a chill and windblown fall; the dry fields and dusty roads turned soggy and bottomless with sucking mud. Icy winds blew down into the land, blew falling leaves through the hollow forests, chilled the black drizzling nights and brought hoar frost to mantle the misty fields of the dreary dawns. Infantrymen on both sides dug their foxholes deeply, shoring up the mucky earth with planks and logs. They could only wonder dismally if these were to be their winter positions as the war seemed to pause and hang amid patrols and skirmishes.

Refugees swept westward through the stalemated areas of Alsace-Lorraine. They choked the roads, crowding the ditches and meadows by night with their misery; by day, streaming from their battered towns, their rickety carts piled high with the pitiful remnants of their homes, odds and ends of household goods, bedding, pots, precious potatoes sacked in pillowslips. Their half-starved cattle and horses staggered along the mud-slick roads while the very young or the very old sat among the flotsam of goods in heavy awkward wagons and the others

walked. Behind them, in the east, the area of desolation grew under the pounding guns, and the swath of ruin cut deeply into the dying year.

As the X Division moved back into the line, the First Platoon came down from its hill. They moved eastward down the valley of Saint-Mihiel, eastward to the lovely rolling hills of the Moselle with its wine-famous vineyards, eastward through the quiet almost deserted city of Nancy and on into the gray desolate wastes of the combat area. They returned to the front to find the roads slimy with mud, the ditches filled with mud-covered lumps that were dead horses and shattered vehicles. They came down to find the towns gray and sodden and blasted under the slanting rain, filled with the miserable, laden refugees seeking shelter, somewhere, anywhere. It was a stark and sorry contrast to the cheering, flag-hung villages of summer.

The hot aftermath of battle was gone, replaced by the chill bitter look of a wasteland that wallowed in churned mud and water-logged decomposition. The clear brazen sky of summer had vanished, and in its stead, came a dreary, lowering horizon from which the rain poured ceaselessly. The wind turned bitter and searching overnight and men shivered and swore as it touched them. With numb hands and feet they cursed their respective quartermasters, bitterly and obscenely, demanding of one another where in hell were the promised overcoats, the waterproof boots.

As the platoon moved eastward in the wake of the division, Lee was back in her usual place beside the ambulance door, watching the gray fall day sweep by the streaming window. The ambulance wheels slipped and slued along the sucking ruts and mud splashed noisily beneath the jouncing floor. Inside, a chill dampness pervaded the dark cabin and the five women remained unusually silent, huddled together for warmth, yet, each apart, wrapped separately and alone with her thoughts. Lee was thinking of the hill, and how brief their stay there had been, and of how fleeting and intangible her own happiness now seemed. Its very briefness was somehow symbolic, she thought, of all her joy; things happened and she was happy until suddenly it was over and she was back where she had been, not happy, not sad, not much of anything. Perhaps, she thought wonderingly, life is no more than that, a slough of boredom and loneliness with occasional transitory and fleeting pleasures, and occasional sorrows. The thought did not cheer her.

Then she caught sight of the first of the refugee columns plod-

ding along the road, and watching them she forgot all about herself. Dismayed, she stared at their pinched faces drawn with cold and weariness, their shoddy clothes that caught and fluttered in the bitter wind as they shuffled through the mud, bent a little forward at the waist to meet the push of the wind and moving blindly, grudgingly to one side to avoid the hospital convoy's splashing wheels. Where could they ever find shelter? she wondered, gazing out at the barren land through which they were passing, a dreary stretch of road running between Toul and Nancy. There was nothing here except an expanse of boggy fields and black dripping forests, with an occasional shelled town raising scarred fingers of broken masonry to the dismal sky.

Where are they going? Where can they possibly go? she wondered, seeing a red chapped hand waving weakly and the cold pinched face of a child slowly recede. An old woman touched with the look of death tugged at the piled cart on which the child sat, and together they tottered toward the west.

Oh my God, Lee thought with a pang, what has all this to do with the very young and the very old, and where can they ever stop? Where can they ever find safety again?

A gust of wind came whistling across the bare fields, striking the broad side of the ambulance with violence. The stumbling figures bent double beneath its thrust, and tattered strings and rags of coats and shawls whipped out behind them. She shivered as if she, too, had felt that bitter lash. With a touch of indifference she supposed that there had always been this, at some age or another, in every land; these children perched on mounds of useless scrap blowing on aching fingers, thin cold youngsters with their small ageless faces marked by the suffering their elders seemed forever determined to inflict upon the young. And the old, too, the humpbacked ancients dragging themselves in search of eternal safety along the world's roads, unwanted, uncared for, using their last precious strength in futility. Everywhere and always and probably as long as man survived there would be this to mark his passing and his culture, a monument of suffering to rival his art and science and law. How thin his hold on security and comfort is at best, she mused, and here, a hold no longer, but a slipping scrabbling clutch of desperation. She thought it odd that man could take such chances with his narrow margin of safety on earth.

Then she felt guilt; guilt for the comparative warmth of the ambulance cabin, guilt for the heavy alpaca-lined jacket over

her wool shirt, guilt for the flesh on her bones and healthy blood beneath her skin, and she hated herself for peering so curiously at the misery of these drenched and draggled hordes, floundering in the mud in a futile urgent search for a place of safety. Shamed, she drew back from the window, eyes going beyond the road and the plodding figures to the gray fields and sky. Rain slashed heavily against the glass. The ambulance tires whined and splashed monotonously on the road surface while behind a truck skidded and bounced, throwing a fine spray of mud and water over the bowed refugees. The gray day lowered dark and forbidding over the wasted land, dreary, hopeless. Then a snatch of a letter she'd received a month or more ago rose before her mind:

"My darling, the days pass so slowly, like a huge camel caravan going nowhere in a desert of nothingness. It is strange to be so weary of all that time can offer, to be so indifferent to what life might someday bring us. I was twenty-eight a week ago (did you remember?) and I feel eighty.

"I can't seem to find solace even in drinking myself to oblivion. I cannot seem to wear away this thin edge of hopelessness that rides me day and night. I believe that if it were not for you, that if it were not for your existence on this same earth, I would find it far easier to seek my own bargain with time, to cancel the contract. I have . . . I had a friend who must have felt that he had to do just this and so, a month ago he took an overwhelming chance and went down in flames. Sometimes, tonight, while waiting, I envy him. I have been out here too long; it's as simple as that. . . ."

Bob had not signed it, he had not finished it and she supposed that he had had no time, or perhaps, feeling the trap around him too keenly, no inclination, and had simply sent it on; words that were only an empty mockery of his despair.

A silver swift Mustang swooped out of the gray overcast and thundered close over the following trucks. Lee caught a glimpse of its glittering fusilage, a flash of the blue army star, and it was gone, leaving the echoing roar of its passing. On the other side of the world those might be his wings, she mused, then cried inwardly, oh why, why do I even let myself think of him now? Before, when I wanted him so much, I couldn't even remember, yet now . . . now he comes suddenly and I haven't the strength to care. Was it remorse then that brought him? she wondered. Yet, if it was, what difference! She might die before she ever saw him again, or, more likely, as he said, he . . . but with an effort

she cut off the thought, pushed it violently away, turning her mind back to the refugees, watching them now with complete resignation.

After a while she began to grow drowsy, and resting her head on her knees, she slipped into an uneasy sleep. Several hours later the ambulance jolted to a halt, bringing her awake. For a moment she was confused, then the driver threw open the door beside her and a blast of wind and rain swept in. Of course! She stared absently into the gray muddy field that was to be their home for another day or week, no more than that surely.

"Just a minute, ma'am. The major says for you all to stay in here a bit. Seems like we already got casualties. There's five ambulances parked over yonder like they was just a-waiting for us. Here, I'll close the door. No use anybody getting wetter than they have to." And he slammed the door in their startled faces and disappeared in the gloom of the descending twilight.

"Christ, what god-awful weather!" Effie Newcomer exclaimed as she sank back onto her seat. "Casualties already, huh? That's a helluva way to start!"

Sally Hawks dumped her pack back on the floor. "If I can ever get started again!" she said dispiritedly. "I wish to hell we'd never left the hill . . ."

Outside their haven the wind dashed rain across the murky fields, sending it spraying against the metal sides of the ambulance, and every now and then it shook the cabin hard. Idly, Lee wondered where they were and tried to recall a map Collier had showed her a week ago. They had crossed the Moselle, there had been the ruined bridge at Toul with the wrecked artillery piece at one end and huge bomb craters pitting the road on the other. Then they had passed through Nancy with its wide tree-shaded boulevards, deserted and oddly quiet. After that, she had slept, so all that she could be sure of was that they were somewhere east of Nancy, or possibly east of Metz.

The ambulance door was yanked open again and their driver stuck his face in. "Miss Effie, the major says for you all to go over to the Clearing Company tent and wait there till they get Shock and Surgery up. Man, we got a terrible backlog. The Clearing Company's so full they got patients waiting in the ambulances and I saw . . ."

"Okay, Billy! Okay. Holy Maria, that boy's a talker! Here, if you'll be letting us out of your buggy, Billy, we'll get ourselves yonder. Just bring your helmets and musette bags, kids. Christ Almighty! Look at that damn rain come down!" Her big bulk

hesitated in the doorway, blocking off for a moment more the chill drive of wind and rain. "God, Lee, baby, look at what they dumped us in, a goddam swamp!"

Lee peered over her shoulder at the soggy field. She could hear faint snatches of hoarse shouting on the wind and knew the men were out there unloading the trucks and getting ready to raise the tents. Poor fellows, she thought, bet they're already soaked to the skin. Rain drove into her face suddenly as Effie stepped heavily to the ground.

"Hell, come on. Aw my God, sometimes I wish I was dead! This damned war!" the older woman grumbled, hunching her shoulders against the wind and tugging her jacket collar higher beneath her sagging chin.

Mutely, the others followed her across the field. The rain pelted against their faces, whipped through their coveralls soaking them instantly while their heavier jackets grew sodden. Heads down, they plodded through the grass, and in spite of her jacket, Lee shivered. It was cold! Mentally, she saw the drawn faces of the refugees bent to the wind. How could they ever stand it?

The Clearing Company tent loomed up in the murk, the wind tugging frantically at the heavy canvas walls, snatching at ropes and sending the poles back and forth with a steady clanking of metal pulleys and rings mingled with the snap of wet canvas. By the entrance were parked the five ambulances, their red and white insignia shining sleekly in the rain.

The nurses ducked under the entrance flap and knew at once that they were back. The foul close air closed over them, beat hotly against their rain-cold cheeks and the thick cigarette smoke stung their eyes. The tent was filled with litters and clumps of walking wounded huddled by the walls. The ground underfoot was churned to slippery mud, and even as they stepped forward, great cakes of the black foul-smelling stuff clung to their boots. Lee hesitated on the threshold wanting suddenly to turn back, to run away, to run out of this stinking tent, out of the gloom weighted with the harsh struggling breath of badly hurt men, their obscene curses and rambling talk, run back into the fall twilight of storm and wind and freedom. Panic assailed her, she half turned and, perhaps, might have run from the tent if Effie had not groaned aloud.

"Ah Christ!"

No. There was no escape. The time on the hill was an interlude only and the interlude was over. It had not changed this,

it had not changed her, and for that, perhaps, she could be grateful. She followed her comrades into the tent, picking her way among the litters. The wind died away from her ears, the clean fresh brush of the rain was lost and a heavy despair settled like an old and worn and heavy coat across her thought.

"Have you a cigarette, nurse?" The hoarse whisper at her feet was edged with pain.

She paused and looked down to see a young man half raised on supporting elbows, ashen lips twisted in a strained grin while eyes that were bright with fever stared up at her from his mud-gray face.

"Sure." She knelt and searched her pockets to find the single crumpled pack Bill had given her the night before on the hill. My God, only the night before! She smiled wonderingly, defeated, for already it seemed weeks behind. The wounded man, thinking that she smiled at him, twisted his lips more painfully, his hot eyes gazing sickly into hers as she placed the cigarette between his stained lips and leaned over to light it. When she brought the match to its tip she was aware of the question and the pleading in those eyes. She looked more fully into the unshaven, filthy face, seeing its leanness, the high forehead and straight well-set nose. A sensitive face, she thought, and a face as young as her own beneath the mask of mud and sweat and pain. Her eyes dropped, finding the stripes on his sleeve, and further the mass of bloodied bandages covering his abdomen where he'd pushed the blanket away. Even without this evidence of pressure bandages she knew that he was badly hurt for his eyes betrayed too well the organic misery of his mutilated body.

"Thank you." He was whispering. "How long . . . how long before . . . I get fixed up?"

"I don't know, Sergeant. You see, we just got here. But soon, I'm sure. You lie back and stay covered. That's important . . ." and she pulled the blanket back over him gently.

"We've been . . . here since last . . . night. It's rough . . . nurse. Rugged war," he breathed, lying back, the cigarette trembling in his hand.

Since last night!

"It won't be much longer," she said tonelessly and rose to turn away.

"Thank you." His whisper followed her.

Oh my God! she cried silently. Don't thank me. If you knew . . . Oh why be eternally sickeningly grateful when there isn't enough I can ever do, there isn't a way on earth to repay you.

Thank me for what? A cigarette? A word? I was up there last night on the hill and you were down here and you thank me. I should laugh, she thought, ah, I should laugh!

"What the hell is eating you, kid?"

"Nothing. Nothing, Effie."

"Well, cheer up we're . . . Oh, hello, Ed."

"Effie, this backlog is murder! You women will have to help," Collier said, his eyes passing Lee as if he didn't see her. "Go out back there where they're getting up the tents and help unload the cots and blankets. No heavy stuff. Soon as they get the tents up and the equipment unloaded start setting up at once. The damn wind is playing hell with the tents. Well, go on, go on!" he ordered sharply. "A little rain won't melt you women!" and he hurried away leaving them to stare after him, openmouthed.

"The man's bothered!" Effie stated impassively. "Well, come on my little bitches, a little rain won't melt us. I hope!"

On emerging from the back entrance of the Clearing Company tent they found their own men struggling to raise the poles that would carry up the canvas of Surgery. A second group was lashing ropes and driving stakes for the Shock Ward tent. The chief nurse picked her way over the tangle of gear and canvas, calling out to the men in her hearty, booming voice and laughing loudly at their efforts against the wind.

"Hey Miss Effie, you're what we need! You come on now and get under this here pole and she's bound to go up!" Laughter followed and was snatched away on the violent wind.

"Aw, my boys, 'tis a real he-man you are to be needing an old lady's muscle. Come on, boys stick your back into it!"

"Aw, come'n, Captain, and give us a hand!"

"The back of my hand! Bend your backs, lads! Bend your backs!" and she grinned maliciously as the half raised tent shuddered out of their hands to collapse again into the mud.

"Goddam it, hold your end, willya!"

"Christ, somebody get that pole!"

"Come on, girls, let's get out of here before they forget us ladies are present!" Effie Newcomer chuckled as she led the way on to the trucks. "Sal, you get on up there and hand out the cots. The rest of us will take 'em over to the Clearing Company's tent and stack 'em out of the weather. Let's go!"

It was a strange evening, violent and murky. The wind and rain seemed to increase with the darkening approach of night. The wind drove against the canvas as sea wind against a sail and tore it repeatedly from weary hands, while the rain drenched

and chilled and spread its misery among the able-bodied and wounded alike. The men of the platoon matched their savage curses with the wind's rage as they strained against the soaked heavy canvas, their bodies bent to the pulling ropes, their hands blistered on the harsh fibers as wet, half-drowned, they shook and shivered and despaired. The confusion, the wasted hours drove Collier into a frenzy. He was everywhere, his face set and white with rage, his eyes blazing as he demanded, cursed, exhorted the weary men.

"Goddam it, pull! Hold that rope, you fool! Over there, get that pole! Ah Christ, where's your guts! Pull!"

Not once had he looked at Lee or spoken to her. He passed her with stony eyes that touched her briefly, almost without recognition. Even drunk as he was he remembers, she thought, trying to ignore the tug of dismay. I suppose he hates me. Well, what if he does? It's about mutual anyway, I was a fool to think that he was any different from the rest, that he was anything more. Yet, her conscience smote her as her eyes slipped sullenly past his thin tired face. What did it really matter that he drank? What did anything matter except that he was driving himself beyond human endurance because he cared?

For what seemed hours she staggered across the soggy ground, her arms laden with litters, blankets, cots, her cold-reddened hands clutching these loads with increasing desperation as the evening grew wilder. Finally, Surgery was raised and the men scurried about the sagging tent driving stakes frantically to secure it before the wind could bowl it over again.

"Lee! Hey, Lee!"

Turning, two cots hugged to her chest, she saw Effie coming up to her, her gray hair blowing wildly across her face as she shouted, "Bring them on into Surgery. Then that's all. Hear? Gotta begin setting up. Man just died out front so we gotta hurry!"

She nodded as Effie bent her disheveled wet head and plodded off toward the trucks for one last load. With a sigh she floundered on through the mud to duck a second later beneath the flapping entrance to the swaying tent. She dropped her burden and went over to the crates of equipment where June and Sally were already at work. One of the men came in with a lighted lantern which he hung on the wildly swinging center pole while several others struggled by the front entrance to bring in the heavy sterilizer and half a dozen more tramped back and forth bringing tables, crates, sterile canvas.

"Larsen, get the generator going for God's sake!" Collier stood in the entrance surveying the scene. "Damn it, Harris, if you'd untie that flap string you'd get that goddam thing in here without knocking the goddam tent flat!" With an expressionless face, his eyes alone alive, he came up to the nurses. "Lee, as soon as your instruments are ready go check with the Clearing Company. They just lost another man in there and there's probably a damn . . . Ah for Christ sake, Harris! You idiot!" Shouting furiously he hurried over to the entrance where the two men still struggled with the sterilizer. "Goddam it, get that thing in here! You're holding up everything else!"

"But, Major, we . . ."

Scornfully, he seized one end of the sterilizer, put his strength to it suddenly. It lurched forward, slid into the tent but even as he straightened the tent shuddered, released from the weight of the machine. For a second the canvas and poles swayed ominously; everyone waited with bated breath half-ready to run for it, but the tent righted slowly.

"Christ, it's not staked yet!" Cursing violently, Collier ducked out into the rain. His voice could be heard shouting at the men still pounding stakes outside.

"Gee, he's sure on the warpath!" Sally exclaimed.

"You can say that again, Sal!" Harris said coming up to them and wiping the sweat and rain from his face. "I tried to tell him we was snared on the damned tent but no, he don't want to listen to nothing today! Lee, where shall I set the table?"

"Over there okay, Effie?"

"Sure. If you like corners. Me, I like to be able to breathe!"

Outside the generator started up, and a moment later the lights went on dimming the temporary lanterns. Lee and Harris set up their table. She had just gotten out the last of the instruments when Collier came swinging back into the tent. His face was livid and shining with beaded drops of rain.

"Where the hell are our cases?" he demanded.

"I was just . . ."

"Well get on with it. All of you!" he shouted. "This is no damn game tonight. Pull yourselves together! All right, get out there and get those men started in here."

"Yes sir. I was just . . ." Lee began but he seized her arm roughly and swung her toward the entrance, saying between his teeth, "I said, get those men. Understand?"

Anger rose in her weary, shivering body but she only nodded, avoiding those dark furious eyes. He started to say something

more but she moved away quickly and plunged out of the tent barely missing two corpsmen who were struggling to raise the canvas sides of the Central Square.

"Hey, look out there, Lee!"

Wordlessly, she ran past, her eyes blinded by tears of rage. Goddam it! Goddam him! She knew that behind her in Surgery they were all standing stricken at the sight of him turning on his assistant so fiercely and her cheeks grew hot. Someone would begin to whisper, a rumor would soon be around that she was on the way out. She knew. She'd heard it all before. He would ride her now until she was a nervous wreck. Because, she thought, because I wouldn't. . . . But then she'd entered the Clearing Company's tent and the sight of it checked her. After all, he was right in a way. They couldn't hurry enough, there wasn't enough they could do.

She sought out the company's MAC officer and together they went down the rows of litters. How long had this man been here? How many chest and belly cases? How many head? With chilled hands she pulled back blankets looking for fresh seepage of blood, checked pulses while her mind gradually relinquished fury, leaving only the traces of pain. And after awhile the pain died away, too, and there was only weariness left and a sense of inconsolable loss.

"Where did all these burn cases come from, Lieutenant?" she asked once.

"A Panzer outfit went on a rampage last night. Got into this recon unit and knocked the hell out of them! These boys are all from the same company."

"You'd better have them sent into Shock right away. I believe Captain Mason's set up but maybe a man had better check. We'll take these three in Surgery right away and the rest can come pretty much as they're set here!"

She rose and started back, aware now that her clothes were soaked to the skin and that she was numb and shivering with cold. As she passed through the Central Square she saw with relief that the Shock tent was secured and Mason's big bulk moved about with his corpsmen setting up cots and unpacking equipment. He waved as she passed, "Start 'em coming, kid!" he called.

"I have," she answered. Then, with a pang of apprehension, she entered Surgery. Collier was there still helping the men get up the scrub table, his bitter voice snapping commands or cursing them fluently. What's the matter with him? she wondered

as she began to set up for their first patient. He's never been this bad! She felt herself growing more and more tense, her nerves drawing taut. Any minute she expected his voice behind her edged and sarcastic, any moment there would be an explosion, the rage, the coldly angry tones. It was childish she knew but her terror of that voice, the dark furious eyes, mounted through her overtired brain, her heart began to pound, her mouth grew dry. I must stop this, she thought. But in panic she waited for the moment when he would come to the table and their work begin. In her fear her hands turned awkward, instruments slipped through her fingers. Oh God, she silently cried, I've got to stop this!

The litter bearers came in with the three selected cases and one was transferred to her table. She slipped over to scrub at the now installed trough, making certain that she kept at a distance from Ed, damning her silly nervousness even as it overwhelmed her.

But when she returned to the table she forgot him for a moment for their patient was badly hurt, his face was a mottled black and beef-red swollen bit of flesh. He was moaning softly, monotonously at the back of his throat and making short weaving motions with his burned head. She reached for the tag on the litter.

"Watch it! Look out!"

Startled she swung around just in time to see the big center poles stagger and start slowly down, carrying canvas, lights, ropes, everything in the wake of their deliberate and dignified fall.

"Christ, look out!"

She was frozen beside her table, her eyes fixed in disbelief at the heavy poles falling toward her. At the last minute she threw herself forward over the man on the table, arching her shoulders over his raw swollen head. Something struck her leg a painful blow. A heavy thud sounded in the confusion of noises and then she was floundering under the wet suffocating mass being irresistibly borne down by the weight of it. She strained back in desperation from the burned face below her chest even as an agonized scream rose from his smoke-raw throat and his broken seared body struggled beneath the unbearable touch and weight.

Somehow, she managed to keep her body just clear of his face but the rest of him was being painfully crushed. He screamed again almost directly in her ear sending frightened shivers along her spine. The damp odor of the canvas was choking her, she

panted for breath as she fought to keep from being dragged flat by the tremendous weight. She tried to call out, she tried to quiet him but the air was being pressed from her lungs.

Somewhere nearby there was a bedlam of muffled voices. She heard someone shout, "For Christ sake, get me outta here!" and someone was raking at the canvas beside her. She could hear the scratching of hands trying to get a grip on the wet heavy fabric and a thin trickle of fresh air suddenly struck her face. She turned her head with difficulty to seek it out only to have it cut off again.

The wounded man screamed again in her ear, then his frantic weak struggles ceased. My God, is he dead? she wondered dizzily. A dull pain grew along her leg, the strain across her back was growing unbearable and her aching muscles began to give beneath the weight. She was slowly being borne down as they weakened. Her legs were trembling violently and her arms, braced against the far side of the table, began to buckle in spite of every effort of her will.

Why don't they hurry? Oh why can't they get us out? she wailed mutely and bit her lips until the blood ran, thinking of her body smashed against that blistered cracked face, of the agony the brush of her jacket must be bringing him now. Unless he's dead, she thought. . . .

The canvas was suddenly lifted from her back. Someone struggled under it nearby and hands reached, pushing it up and away from her in the tangle of ropes and overturned lights and cases. She gulped hungrily at the fresh rain-scented air that rushed in and hardly noticed as the men reached and scrambled and cursed, pulling the tent away.

"Watch out!" someone cried, "there's two more litters here."

She started to turn to help but a sharp pain stabbed through her leg, and stifling a cry, she bent to roll up the soaked leg of her coveralls. Relieved, she found no blood but the skin was rapidly turning a nasty blue-black. God, I hope it isn't broken, she thought, dismayed at the sight of her swelling, discolored flesh. She tested it gingerly. No, I guess it's just bruised, she decided, wincing with pain.

"Lee! Lee, are you all right?"

She turned, lost her balance and clutched the table for support as Collier came up beside her, his face dead white, his voice shaking with intensity. "Goddam this stinking hole! Goddam them for shoving us into this filthy field!" he all but screamed. "Get that tent off, you fools, there's two men still under there!"

With an effort he lowered his voice and turned back to her, his eyes searching her face. "Are you all right?" He reached out and almost imploringly touched her arm. "I saw the pole fall. I was on the other side with the others and I saw it fall toward you. I thought . . . I thought I saw it hit you."

Mutely, she stared at him, uncertain and confused. Suspicion lurked in her weary brain. Did he mean it, this concern or was he only mocking again?

"My God, I thought you were badly hurt," he cried hoarsely.

"No, I'm all right," she said, moving uneasily back from his hand trembling still on her arm. "It hit my leg a little, but it's only bruised, Ed." She looked down at the man on the table. "I think he's just unconscious. I was afraid he had died. . . ."

There was an instant's silence. He looked away from her and down at his shaking hands. "All right," he said at last, his voice completely toneless. "Have him carried into Shock and the other two as well. Tell Tim to check them carefully while we set up again." Then he left her and a moment later she could hear him beyond the sagging canvas shouting, until even that was lost on the wind.

"Jesus, what happened, nurse?" one of the men caught on a litter on the ground asked dazedly, trying to raise himself to see.

"No. Don't try to sit up. Just lie still. The tent blew over but it's all right now."

If they lived through this, she thought, as her teeth chattered with cold and from the aftermath of shock, *nothing* can kill them!

"Litter bearers!" she cried, urgently.

CHAPTER 16

As time passed subtle changes continued to take place within the First Platoon and the differing of relationships became more definable. Lee was never certain whether she was the first or the last to notice these changes. Her initial awareness that things were different came when Collier began seeking her out again though not with their earlier easy friendship. Now, to her dismay, he seemed to cling to her, to seek her company, she thought, out of loneliness and despair. He seemed to want her to reassure him about something, to

comfort him, and in a way she tried though she knew later that she had not tried hard enough.

Sometimes he would bring to her an urgent flow of words that bordered on the incoherent. He spoke about his past freely now, about Chicago, where he was born, and had lived until the end of his interneship. He hated and loved this part of his life in an ambivalence of emotion that startled the girl for until this time she had thought him far too rational, too cold for such intensity. He talked often about his Jewishness as if it held a key but to what exactly she could not comprehend for she, herself, had no conception of racial consciousness. Their positions were reversed and where before he had teased and laughed at her and had drawn her out with apparently genuine interest, now he talked only of himself, somberly, self-mockingly and with little inhibition.

"Do I believe in anything, you ask?" he had said one day after a violent diatribe against the war in which he had likened it to a tumor in the mind of humanity, and humanity, itself, to that type of patient who so loves his illness that he will allow himself to die rather than be deprived of its peculiar comfort. "Should I believe in anything? Should I believe that this will be the last war? Should I believe that we have no economic stakes in beating Germany to her knees? Should I believe that these ruined towns and slaughtered men represent a special brand of righteousness and that we are absolved for the death of children? What should I believe, my sweet? Can you show me, can you tell me where I may pin my faith? See, *you* don't know. You've been here too long. It doesn't really take much time, does it?"

"But," she had replied, "if you don't believe in anything, if all this has no meaning for you, why do you stay? Why do you go on at all, Ed? You told me once that you could have transferred to a general back in England. Why don't you then?"

"Why do you work so hard, Lee?" he retaliated. "Why do you stay after hours in Surgery sterilizing and making four-by-fours beyond the call of duty? Why? Because you care, of course."

"Care?"

"Sure. How could you not care, being you? You're no more endowed with a coat of mail than I. Someone, perhaps that sad uncle of yours, instilled the conscience of a Quaker, at least of a Quaker if not of a Puritan, in your malleable soul when you were a helpless kid and couldn't stop him. It's too late to shed it now."

"And you? Who gave you a conscience?"

"My mother, naturally. You know what fool things mothers do to their sons. A doctor, she wanted her boy to be, and a doctor he is. She told me I must do good in the world, you see. It was as simple as that." He had smiled, a pleasant open smile and for a moment she had hope. However, he crushed it in the next breath.

"It's easy enough to be a party to folly and know it as such. For instance, one can go to a cocktail party and stand with glass in hand amid all the chatter, spend a couple of hours feeling stupid, talking stupidly, drowning in triviality and, yet, not have to feel any of it as either real or of genuine importance. Well, isn't the war much the same? We're here, we do our job, but we don't have to believe we're saving democracy or civilization or even Man."

"You sound so bitter."

He caught his breath. "Bitter?" he cried, "I? What in God's name have I to be bitter about? It's these poor devils trapped in this mess. . . . Don't you see it yet, Lee? You and I have no way to repay them ever, even if we killed ourselves trying!"

"Yes," she had replied, "I know that."

There were other times when he sought her out only to sit in moody silence, curled in upon himself and no matter how hard she might try she could not penetrate his gloom. On these occasions it seemed to her that he had retreated, that lost and beaten he had turned away from her and from everyone, yet needed still the security offered by the presence of a fellow human being.

This renewal of his interest in her had a twofold result. It served to estrange her from her co-workers, for in a measure Collier was associating her with his own increasing brutality. Her comrades began to resent her, thinking of her as the favorite, and as he became odder, driving them with increasing fury, their resentment approached actual hatred. She could feel it in the air, could feel it as blades of dislike in a glance, in the insolent tone of a voice, the cynical twist of a mouth, and she shivered beneath it as she would beneath a lash.

Once she summoned the courage to discuss the situation with her chief.

"Why, Effie? What's the matter with everyone? Everything has changed so. Or, is it just me?"

"Well, I tell you, kid, he's got them on the rampage now. They're all fair crazy what with being dog-tired themselves,

you know, and no end to this business, and then they're scared to death of the man. Put it all together and you've got 'em hating his guts! He's driving everybody too hard. There'll come a day when this platoon's going up like an ammo dump, mark my words!"

"I know but I think sometimes that they . . . well, just because I don't hate him and because I work for him that they . . ."

"Oh hell!" Effie snorted. "What do you care, kid? Let 'em talk. They're bound to say things about any nurse he has working for him. Just don't you get bothered about that."

Effie was right, of course, but that didn't help. Lee could only shudder at the memory of what they had said about the others, her predecessor and the English girl at Taunton, the nurse in Africa, and she imagined that the same things were being said about herself now. I won't care, I can't, she told herself, I'm too tired to care!

Gradually, though, the weight of general censure plus the strain of Collier's growing dependency upon her began to tell. She grew restless, edgy, irritable; she began to avoid him as much as she could; she drew to the fringe of the group, voluntarily increasing her own isolation. I don't care about him; I don't care about any of them, she thought, and defiantly went her own way alone.

Then one night the whole thing collapsed upon her. Ironically, the blow was delivered by Captain Allen, the least popular member of the platoon. He came up to her during a coffee break as she stood waiting, cup extended.

"Lee, I want to talk to you!" he cried harshly, his eyes cold with anger in the pudgy paleness of his face.

She looked up startled, aware of the pause around her, the intent sharpening stares, the waiting. "What?" she asked in confusion.

"Look here, I'm fed up with this business of being specialized against my better judgment. It's bad enough to have a nurse selecting my cases without . . ."

"But, Captain Allen, if you mean that last sucking chest, it came in expressly on orders of Major Collier. He said . . ."

"I don't give a damn what he said! If he wanted to give me an order he should have done it in person instead of through a nurse," he interrupted harshly, laying contemptuous emphasis on the word "nurse." "I believe you forget yourself! Just because you may possibly find yourself in the position of being present court favorite doesn't mean that you have the right

to presume. You would be wiser to give some thought to the future. We all know—" and here the little doctor's small mouth curled, his pale eyes traveled slowly over her from tangled, sweat-soaked hair to her muddy boots, and there was a world of insinuation in that look, so much so that she felt the hot blood rush to her cheeks, "we all know," he continued deliberately in a voice that carried, "how things have been and that you have special prerogatives denied the rest of us, but you never know, you never know."

A wild uncontrollable fury surged through her, her body began to shake. The rotten little sneak! Her cheeks flamed, her green eyes blazed. "I don't know what you mean!" she cried.

"Oh come, come," he smirked and started to turn away.

Overcome with anger she went on recklessly, "If you're complaining because you got another sucking-chest case, then speak to the major, if you dare! I catalogue cases on his order and if you've forgotten, Captain Allen, I've been doing it for months. As for the rest, I think you're . . . maliciously trying to . . . I don't know what you mean . . . I . . . I" she found herself spluttering and bitterly wished she could control the shaking of her voice. To her chagrin, tears of rage sprang to her eyes.

"Wait a minute!" He turned back to her, his high, almost feminine, voice cutting across her angry flow of words. "For a nurse speaking to a doctor you show very little respect, Caine. As an officer speaking to a superior you show damn little! Of course," his voice lowered a trifle, grew weighted with sarcasm and a small complacent smile played across his pudgy face. "Of course, I realize that so far you haven't had to worry much about showing consideration for the rest of us. However, please confine your prerogatives to the realm in which they apply. I'm not, and I'm sure the rest of us, are not concerned with your personal arrangements but this other matter affects me professionally, so I am telling . . . "

"I don't know what you're insinuating!" she cried, beside herself, her voice bordering on hysteria, "I think you're deliberately trying to insult . . ." she stammered. Oh why didn't someone stop him? Why did they all stand there listening to him? Effie! Sally! All of them! What's the matter? What's the matter with these people I've known for months? They don't believe it, oh surely, they can't believe it!

At that moment Collier came into Surgery. He glanced briefly around, seeming not to notice the silence or the tension of the group. Wearily, indifferently, he moved past the two

principals, glancing only casually at Lee's stricken face as he filled his cup with coffee and sipped at it in hurried gulps. Conversation resumed in a guarded way and the voices, half-relieved, half-regretful, resumed.

Minutes later they were back at work, the incident buried, though not forgotten. Mutely, Lee went about her job, avoiding the sympathetic eyes of the two technicians for fear she would burst into tears. She kept as much distance between herself and Collier as she could, awaiting his orders silently and only speaking to him directly when she must. As the night wore on her mind wearily retraced everything that had been said. It seemed odd to her that Allen, though he had never liked her, should turn on her so openly at this time. It was as if he knew . . . as if he thought that Collier was no longer a threat to himself. Suddenly she remembered an argument the fat little surgeon had had one day with Tim Mason. She'd come to Shock with a message for Tim, and as neither man had heard her approach, she had stood to one side waiting for them to finish and notice her.

"What the hell are you driving at, Joe?" Mason had demanded.

Allen had replied in a mocking tone, "Oh come now, Tim, you know as well as I do that the man's riding for a fall. Our esteemed colleague is hitting the bottle often and heavily these days. How long do you think a surgeon can last under those circumstances? Everyone knows it, too, which doesn't say much for the morale of this outfit. If you ask me he's already got a good case of the shakes. He's turning into a first-class alcoholic and what's more he doesn't give a damn!"

"The hell you say!" Mason had burst out indignantly. "What man doesn't do a little drinking over here? Myself, I think you're trying to pipe-dream your way into a command, aren't you?"

Allen had shrugged his narrow shoulders unperturbed. "No, not necessarily although I wouldn't mind in the least. However, at the moment I was just trying to point out something fairly obvious. I wasn't aware that you and Ed were such good friends."

Mason snorted. "Hell, I recognize an over-worked man when I see one. I don't say he hasn't been too long in this game. Jesus, man, twelve, eighteen, sometimes twenty-four hours in that stinking Surgery for over two years is enough to break a superman! But damn it, don't start rumors you might regret, Joe.

You'll find . . . oh, hello there, Lee." He broke off abruptly at the sight of her.

Allen had turned, stared at her then and smiling faintly, brushed past without a word.

Mason had stared after him, a perplexed look settling over his usually hearty features. "Damn him!" he had muttered beneath his breath.

Remembering this scene she glanced up at Collier now, driven by a painful curiosity. She had seen him drunk twice; there were whispers of other occasions. Could Allen possibly be right? Was this the reason he drove them all so wildly? Was this why he had grown so nervous and irritable and actually brutal? She stared at his intent face revealed so defencelessly beneath the lights and involuntarily she drew a shaky breath for the thin lips were curled in an ugly sneering line and his dark eyes stared down, almost blindly following the pattern of his moving hands. A small blue vein throbbed in his right temple.

A half-forgotten picture swam to the surface of her mind: a sterile white-walled surgery, a child's face staring angrily up from the table, and a blind, hooded surgeon bent over the body clawing with bloody hands. A faint shudder rippled over her as she withdrew her gaze and bent to her work again. A vague intimation of disaster lingered and brought her uneasiness.

"Goddam it, Harris!" Collier's voice broke savagely across the quiet. "Christ Almighty; what's the matter with you? Get that out of my way!"

Startled, she looked up again to see the pulse throbbing furiously in his temple. A light flush had crept beneath the pallor of his skin. Something is terribly wrong tonight! she thought, feeling a growing premonition of disaster through her fatigue and hurt. She was aware of the tension in the others as if they, too, were waiting for something.

She breathed a sigh of relief when the difficult femoral artery case was finished and finally carried out. Yet, in his place came another, a badly fractured leg with multiple shrapnel wounds and after him another. The night wore on slowly.

Outside, ambulances splashed through the mud, and each time a new patient was brought to their table she found herself glancing anxiously at Collier. She could not help it, for she was frightened. More than once he intercepted her worried stare, yet he looked straight at her without change of expression, and each time their eyes met, terror assailed her.

The two technicians were also affected. They looked at each

other and at her guardedly, spoke in low tones, and avoided their surgeon as if afraid to chance his empty frigid stare. No one anywhere in the tent laughed or joked that night, the tension lay heavily across all of them as if they were being held in suspense against their wills for something they knew was coming yet could not understand.

Wearily, Lee bent over the new case. It was after three o'clock and the night was drawing slowly to an end. Thank God! she thought, and glanced hopefully at their patient. Not too difficult. "Multiple body wounds, grenade fragments," she read on the tag. Relieved she went about the task of prepping but when she checked pulse and pressure a few minutes later she realized that she was wrong. The man was in a state of shock far deeper than his wounds warranted. Probably from having been out there too long, she thought anxiously, and a faint tinge of alarm touched her voice as she called out the results of her check.

"Whole blood, Harris," Collier snapped. "Make it a general, Lee."

Mutely she obeyed and as she slipped the cone over the slack yellow face she made another quick check.

"Sir, his respiration is . . ."

"I can see that!" he cut her off brusquely. "All right, Mullens, prep his upper thigh."

She turned back and set her instruments, and as the patient began to sink beneath the anesthesia she reached again for the limp wrist. It was dangerously thready. It was easy to see that shock was proceeding in spite of the whole blood seeping into his veins. We've started too soon, she thought. He hasn't had time to reverse. We're going too quickly!

"Ed, he's . . ."

"For Christ's sake, shut up," he cried, his eyes bright with fury.

What'll I do, she wondered, oh my God what will I do! Perhaps, I'm wrong. A moment later, when she checked again she knew that she wasn't wrong. At this rate the man would soon be in irreversible shock and nothing could save him. She was suddenly terrified, sweat beaded her forehead and soaked her mask; her heart thudded heavily. She must do something. She must tell him! A minute more, she thought numbly, I'll wait a minute more. By then I can be sure. Ed will see for himself.

But the thought gave her no relief. Instead a wave of guilt and shame washed over her. Had it come to the point then that out of craven fear she would risk this man's death. Yet, how can

I be sure? How can I? she implored mutely of her own conscience. I'm only a nurse . . .

Collier was already probing deeply in the rent flesh seeking the steel fragments of the German grenade. Only a minute more, she promised herself as she handed him the instruments. Her hand was none too steady, and once she almost dropped a retractor.

"Buck up!" he said curtly without looking at her.

Oh Jesus, she swore as panic overwhelmed her again. She was afraid to speak, afraid to keep silent for as the seconds ticked past she was increasingly aware of the shallow breathing, the laboring heaving suck of the man's chest. Only a nurse, she thought, they said so themselves.

"Ed . . ." she quavered at last, "his pulse is very . . ."

"Christ!" he muttered irritably and stepped to the head of the table to make a quick check. "All right, damn it! I'm going as fast as I can!"

"Don't you think we should stop . . ."

"No! Goddam it, stop your sniveling. Only a minute more." A heavy frown settled across his pale forehead. She had heard the note of uncertainty in his voice and saw the vein throb violently in his temple.

Why? Why? she thought frantically as the slow minutes ticked by and in growing alarm she re-checked the man's pulse and pressure but even though she knew that he heard her whispered count, Collier never looked up. Finally, unable to stand it another second, sure within herself that the man was close to if not beyond the point of irreversible shock, she turned to speak but her first frightened words were checked at her lips when she saw Ed's face. He was standing completely rigid under the lights holding the stained instruments in frozen immobility while his dark eyes were fixed in a mesmerized stare on the tremors that ran from his clenched fingers all the way up his extended forearms. He seemed like a victim of an advanced nervous disorder suffering spasm after spasm of violent muscular contractions, and even as she stared, she knew immediately that he was standing there naked to all of them and fighting a losing battle for self-control. Even as he struggled the tremors grew more pronounced, the pulsing vein beat faster.

Without warning he suddenly moaned and turned to stare straight at her with a blind lost look of utter defeat. The instruments fell from his nerveless fingers to strike the table with a ringing sound. Startled, the two technicians looked up just in

time to see their surgeon swing violently away from the table and half run, half shuffle from the tent.

For the space of a second all three of them stood paralyzed. Lee recovered first. She snatched the anesthesia mask from the man's blue face. "Quick, Harris, run to Shock," she panted. "Get Captain Mason! Tell him to hurry! But don't speak to anyone . . . hurry!"

Harris ran out, his young face white and scared.

"Help me, Mullens!" she pleaded. "Help me!"

They did what they could, working frantically over the man but it was obvious that he was dying, his limbs already convulsing.

My God, what shall I do? She glanced desperately over at the other two teams, both of them bent in concentration over their tables seemingly oblivious of what was happening. Should I ask them to help? she wondered. Yet, it would take as long for them to interrupt their own work as for Mason to arrive from the Shock Tent. Oh Tim, hurry!

His voice was suddenly in her ear, "What happened, Lee?"

"Oh Tim . . . " she could have wept from sheer relief, "there's no time . . . I'm afraid . . ."

Mason saw the situation at once and moved in to close the wounds as quickly as possible, tieing off the worst of the bleeders. "Get more blood ready. It's the only damn chance. No . . . by God I'll have to eject . . ." a scowl of concern spread across his face as his bag hands worked swiftly and skillfully, but it was of no use, the man was gone too far in the process of dying.

Ten minutes later he was dead and Mason's sudden cursing brought to everyone's attention the fact that he, not Major Collier, was working there.

CHAPTER 17

"Lee?"

The quiet voice brought her whirling around.

"Lee," he repeated, standing not six feet away and staring at her intently.

She gasped, a feeling of shock mingled with relief stirring through her lethargy, for during the hours since that moment

when he had dropped his instruments and fled she had imagined him in all manner of insanities of manic remorse or suicidal guilt. Now he stood there quietly, not changed, not wild. Instead, his pale face seemed very still and composed. Too numb to speak she leaned back against a packing case and stared at him curiously.

The night had finally ended, the others had scattered to their cots to sleep away the cold, drizzling morning, while she had stayed on alone in Surgery making bandages, too upset to sleep. Her sense of guilt for all that had happened and the knowledge of her own cowardice hurt terribly. Though she knew that she had tried, she also knew that fear had kept her from trying hard enough. Exhausted at last, her mind and her body driven beyond the last ounce of energy, she had come to a half stand, half sit among the piled cases of equipment by the rear entrance of the Surgical tent. Here he had found her gazing dully out at the slanting rain.

"Can we talk?" he asked in an apologetic voice, "or were you going?"

"I was . . . in a minute," she replied. "But you're soaking, Ed. Hadn't you better go change?"

"I will . . . in a minute," he said with a wan smile. "I've been tramping around in the wet, clearing my head, so to speak. I kept walking about, here and there." He spoke absently, searching his pockets for cigarettes and she noticed that his hands shook badly still as he fumbled about in the folds of his clothes. "Tell me . . . No, perhaps, I'd better explain first."

She dug out a forgotten pack of dry cigarettes as he stared in dismay at the soggy remains of his own and offered them quickly for she did not want to interrupt the weary thread of his voice as he continued: "I think I've got everything straight now, Lee. I've been building up to this for weeks. A blowout had to come. You can understand that, can't you. So, I blew up. And now it's over though I suppose there will be repercussions and all that. I should have had the sense to take a break; Tim's been after me long enough, God k ows, to knock it off. But . . . well, you know how it is, you'd feel damn guilty pulling out right now with the backlogs we've been having! Anyway, it might have been worse . . ."

She caught her breath but he went on without noticing. "Funny thing, I didn't even go hunt out a bottle," he mused, glancing up at her obliquely and then away, and his voice

turned wry, "yes, that's the joke. When I needed the stuff the most I didn't even give it a thought. That's what makes me so sure everything's okay now. This was a temporary thing, a sort of warning." He looked down at his trembling fingers, spreading them carefully on his knee, then he looked up again, and she was sickened by the naked pleading in his eyes.

He's asking me to tell him that's all it is, she thought. A temporary thing, wasn't it? A blowoff. He doesn't know, she thought on a wave of panic, that the man died!

He must have sensed her uncertainty for he lowered his head again, murmuring, "I don't know, Lee. I'm damned sick of all this."

Lee's panic died away to lethargy again, a great smothering indifference. I can't tell him, she thought wearily. Let Tim . . . let someone else. I can't.

For a moment he was silent, then looked up again and his low toneless voice took on an edge of fear. "Oh Christ, why the hell do I try to fool myself any longer. Something's happened to me! I'm all washed up! You know it, don't you? You sit there knowing it. You've known it right along. You're wondering how I can be so goddam stupid, eh? For God's sake, Lee what's the matter with me? My mind goes blank, my hands . . . my hands . . . I forget what I'm doing and I look down and my hands refuse to move, they go out of control. What is it, Lee?" he cried, raising his hands clenched in tight trembling fists only to let them fall limply to his sides. The shrillness died away from his voice leaving it flat and toneless again. "You tell me, Lee," he said.

She looked briefly at the bleak, etched profile so sharply lined with fatigue, wondering how she could ever summon the energy to speak. What could she say anyway? You're washed up, Ed. Of course you are. The man died on your table when it wasn't . . . wasn't necessary . . . if you had listened . . . stopped to consider . . . No . . . no! I can't say it, she thought. I can't! I can't even help him.

Yet she managed a little though even to her ears it sounded empty and unconvincing. "Why don't you leave the platoon, Ed? Why not take that transfer to a general? Or even, just a leave? We'd manage, I know. You should get away . . . you ought to get out before . . . well . . . before you regret . . ."

"Before it's too late, eh?" he finished for her with a sardonic smile. "That's what you mean, isn't it? Before it's too late.

You do know, don't you, baby? You're trying to tell me politely that I'm through! Right?"

"No! No! I didn't mean that at all, Ed. I only meant . . ." but it sounded so patently insincere that she stopped and swallowed uneasily and looked away from him.

"What the hell!" he cried savagely, staring at her now with hot angry eyes. "Say what you mean! I'm not a child! For God's sake, say what you think!"

Lee recoiled.

"Listen!" he cried, rising from the edge of the case and seizing her by the shoulders, shaking her as though to emphasize his words, "listen! Go on and say it! Don't just stand there like an idiot. You were saying. . . . Before it was too late? Too late for what, Lee?"

"Ed, please. . . ."

"No. You've got to tell me. No one else would. You know that. My God, we've talked a lot, you and I. You know all sorts of things about me. You can tell them when I crack up, can't you, Lee? He wanted to work so he wouldn't have to think, you'll say. He was nutty as a fruitcake . . . balmy . . . had to make his peace with his conscience and all that sort of thing. You can tell them. They won't understand but that's all right. I'm psycho . . . so what will it matter . . . to them or to you . . ."

"Don't talk like . . ."

"Don't talk?" he all but screamed, seizing on her futile protest. "Don't talk? My God, Lee, if I don't my brain will burst. You don't know . . . you can't know. I tell myself it's nothing, I'm all right but I know . . . oh yes, I know. You don't have to tell me . . ." His voice dropped suddenly, he shrugged his shoulders and grinned, a twisted strange smile. "You'll have to forget all this, Lee," he said, searching her face with mocking eyes. "It won't do for you to remember, understand?"

His whole manner had changed abruptly, leaving her to stare in bewilderment. The frantic appeal had gone from his strained eyes, the doubt and entreaty from his voice, and suddenly he laughed, a harsh ugly sound that ripped through the quiet tent.

"Tell me," he said softly, "does it still bother you to find that you were human after all?"

Confused, Lee looked away from him. I can't be angry with

him, she thought. I won't. He wants to hurt because he, himself, is hurt.

Summoning her courage she said, "Why don't you take some leave, Ed? To Paris or London or. . . ."

He dropped his hands suddenly from her shoulders and walked out of the tent without another word. She watched him slosh off through the mud, his shoulders hunched, head bent against the rain. She started to call after him, perhaps to call him back, she wasn't sure, but the thought of the man who had died closed her lips and she let him go on.

She stood many minutes after he had disappeared around the corner of the mess tent, listening to the drive of the wind across the soggy field and its lonely soughing in the trees across the road. She glanced up at the heaving restlessness of the clouds scudding so low and heavily across the gray sky that hovered without end over the muddy desolation of the ruined shell-torn land. The wind whistled with a desperate cry that beat among the trees and bushes, like the wail of the lost buried in these smashed forests. A gust lifted her hair and brought the faint, chill stench of death decomposing in the muddy shambles of a small town a hundred yards down the road.

She stirred and walked out into the field picking her way around the deep muddy ruts made by the ambulances and jeeps. Urged on by sudden impulse, she walked out of the hospital field and onto the empty road to turn away from the shell of buildings. She followed the dreary curve of the lane around a bend in the hill aware as she plodded along that the fall morning was darkening fast. A heavy storm cloud marched across the leaden sky. Around her the land lay like a dead thing.

The heavy hand of depression lay over all the obscure darting thoughts that kept rising to the surface of her mind. She thought of the man who had died on their table last night, she thought of Collier and his hands that would no longer obey his brain. She thought of her young husband whose face she could not clearly recall, she thought of the man who had been her lover on the hill; she thought of all these related and unrelated things, unreal and strange and yet terrifyingly real, and of herself. Without heeding where she walked she turned off the deeper ruts of the lane on to a small cart track that skirted the edge of the shattered forest and rose along the slopes of a gentle hill. It seemed to her that she no longer

had any control over her own destiny, and she wondered vaguely if she ever had. She felt starkly now the confusion of all purpose. Nothing that happened now could matter very much.

On the crest of the hill she came upon a rude wooden cross, two sticks tied together with a length of twine to mark the head of an untended grave. A caked and rusted German helmet, a hole gaping in one side, was cocked on one arm. Water ran in channels down the mound of earth and she absently noticed the drainage ditches dug from the sides of the grave.

On the edge of the wood stood a burned-out Tiger tank, its gun pointing uselessly into the forest while rain splashed down its blackened sides. The ugly treads, blown off, lay rusting in reddish clay nearby. For sometime she stood beside the grave, absorbed in watching the cocky helmet rock gently in each gust of wind, and a voice whispered somewhere in the depths of her brain, how afraid you are of an empty death beneath an empty sky, an indecent human corruption in a desolate world! Yet, why care? It means nothing. There is nothing more than oblivion to fear.

The chill wind cut across the dreary fields. She shivered and crouched down on a hummock of dry grass beside the grave to stare before her with dull eyes. It was dead, long dead, this land stretching endlessly to a scarred gray rim, the dull horizon of a ruined world. "And it hasn't any end," she whispered. "It goes on and on and there isn't any end for Ed or for me, or anyone; except this, a pile of mud."

She buried her face in her hands wanting to weep for his blank exhausted face, his shadowed dark eyes so empty now and his mind tired and broken beyond control. As if in mockery, she could not even weep and so she crouched there, waiting for the tears that would not come. She heard the anguished sigh of the trees at the black forest's edge punctuated by the faint jangle and clank of the helmet moving on its crude arm.

Dark torn clouds swept past on the wind, the shadow of a storm drew swiftly over the shell-cratered fields, drawing a veil between her and the water-soaked foxholes dotting the slope, the tank shell waiting by the whipping trees and rustling bushes, its silenced gun pointing alertly into the woods. The spell of the dead land was all pervading, the power of its spent violence whispered and sighed from the wastes and the specter of this charnel place clutched at Lee's throat. She

was aware of her fear of it, of her fear of a death like this, forgotten and lonely with a crude cross driven brutally into the ground beside an unknown head: of a death that sighed on the wind from the unknown, uncounted corpses scattered in the mud of the forest and fields beyond, a death that seemed to wait among the shell-scarred trees, the clipped tangle of branches, the crescent mounds of dirt exploded in fury from the sodden earth.

Yet, she was too sick at heart, too weary to even know the depths of her fear, too tired to even care that she feared. She continued to sit in the growing dusk, emptied of emotion, of hope, of thought, empty as the wind, the silent waiting gun, the blackened tank, empty as the storm now looming across the dead land.

CHAPTER 18

Rain! Rain!

October stretched drearily toward winter and each sodden day left summer further behind the slanting curtain of rain. The already dismal land was churned to a great gray brown waste of mud through which the ambulances floundered and stuck, the litter bearers stumbled and often fell. The eternal muck seeped into open wounds and festered in dead flesh, soaked into boots and clothing and caked the faces of the living, filled the mouths of the dead. Mud and rain! A great soggy wasteland of mud and rain where dead faces turned to oozing masks and sodden figures sank slowly in the muck. Corpses of men and horses in stinking gray castings of mud were scattered hu[illegible]shly in ditches and rubble-filled streets.

And still it rained!

Civilians sloshed back to towns reduced to shambles in the wake of battle. Patiently, muttering weary complaint against the cold, they picked up their muddy dead burying them without coffins in mud-drowned graves. Patiently, they pushed back the rubble from their streets, gathering the spoils of war strewn carelessly aside by looting soldiers, and crawled into the cellars of what had once been their homes to wait the coming winter. The less fortunate, who had lost even their cellars, stumbled back along the roads leading westward to

Nancy or Metz, a cold, starving, miserable horde crowding the roads that led away from Alsace and Lorraine.

Ribbed jackets and blanket-lined overalls were issued to a few lucky American front line soldiers, bed rolls and blankets and long overcoats were brought forward in trucks, and the riflemen who waited for them cursed the rain, in earnest now, and the cold and the quartermaster corps. Rear-echelon troops moving into what buildings they could find intact, complained bitterly of broken windows and damp walls and wind that would not stay outside.

And still it rained!

Near Luneville, the First Platoon raised its sodden canvas to work ankle deep in mud. Here, one of the men out searching for straw for his bed, came across a gruesome discovery near the ruins of an old barn which the Platoon was using for a mess shelter. Something rustling back and forth in the wind first attracted his attention, and investigating, he found the shrapnel-riddled body of an old woman sprawled in the mud, withered face to the sky, one arm outflung and still clutching the hand of a small child. The child lay crumpled on her side, as if thrown by the blast and weight of steel that had hurled itself into her small body. The once bright red of her dress was dark brown with caked mud and dried blood. Like the old woman's black shawl, it fluttered forlornly in the icy wind that moaned through the ruined beams and empty leaning walls of her shattered home.

As October drew to its close, artillery set up in the swampy fields around the hospital, and split the drenching days with steady firing. The once-clear hard crack of faraway exploding shells had now degenerated into a crazy mumble of sound. A tank battalion pulled into the field across the road and sweated out its priority delivery of precious fuel. All along the roads from Nancy, truck convoys of food, ammunition, and gas were stalling in the mud, for even the main routes were little more than narrow, earth-surfaced lanes.

The First Platoon noted little of what was going on around them. They had barely time to curse the rain and sucking mud. Casualties came pouring back from the Luneville area where riflemen, unprotected by their own tanks which were stalled for want of gas, were meeting the thrusts of the dreaded Tiger tanks. It was when these Panzer units struck that the hospital platoon was filled with wounded, and the backlog kept the three surgical teams bent night, and far into day at their

tables in the old familiar pattern. Then one night, late in October, the climax of the unit's long trek across France was reached. It happened without warning.

Several times during the early evening Lee had straightened, thinking uneasily that even above the normal fury of the rain drumming against canvas, and the wind slapping and tugging at loose ropes and flaps, the night was filled with growing sound. Artillery was firing steadily over the tents, concussion adding its force to the wind to sway and whip the wet canvas in a ceaseless drubbing of sound. Out on the road, tanks roared by, the clanking of their treads dulled by the mud.

"Hey, is that a burp gun I heard?" someone said suddenly.

The others raised their heads, staring at each other with startled faces as they listened. In a lull in the barrage there came the faraway rattle of the German gun and the answering fury of heavier American weapons.

"Say, isn't that pretty close?"

"Oh hell, we're at least four miles from the line. Could be it came in on a gust of wind."

Nevertheless, everyone worked uneasily, glancing up at each other now and again, and all were aware of the steadily mounting rage of the artillery firing over them and the increased blasts against the tents. Ambulances kept turning into the field, their tires whining in the mud and the voices of the wounded were hoarse with excitement mingled with fear.

Inside Receiving the wounded reflected more acutely the general tension. Lee was repeatedly stopped and held in desperate talk by men who were restless at the sounds of nearing artillery.

Somewhere among the strewn litters a gray face raised weakly, a black mouth opened, "Ah Christ, water, gimme water. For God's sake, water . . ." and the answering soft drawl of a corpsman kneeling in the dirt, "Aw, I'm sorry, Joe. No water for you, boy. You got it in the guts. No water, fella. Sorry."

As if to remind them that the social order had not disintegrated entirely, the receiving clerks sat behind their lighted desks and questioned and wrote and questioned again. Rank? Serial number? What outfit, soldier? What company, sir? And in the background the low voices murmured on and on. . . .

"If I ever see that son-of-a-bitch captain again so help me I'll shoot the bastard! If I have to hang for it, I'll kill him! Whatta he do? Christ, he forgot to send a runner to tell us

he was withdrawing the Second Platoon from our flank. First we know of it the damn *krauts* are all over us. We get back, what's left of us, and then we hear what he done. My lieutenant, he says he's gonna get him himself; he's half-crying, see, because he damn near lost half the platoon and they ain't back here, they're up forward somewhere and they're gonna stay. But he didn't have a chance, the lieutenant. Got it right through the head. I seen his body when they brought me into the aide station. I ain't hurt bad though. I'm gonna be back up in the line and when I see that bastard. . . ."

"Then we come to the river and the engineers is supposed to get us across. Sure, they got the boats down there all right but damned if there's an engineer anywhere along that damn bank when the artillery began to come in. They'd dug themselves a hole and pulled their goddam asses in. So what? So the colonel says we've got to man the tubs ourselves. Go on, boys, you row 'em over and get your stinking heads shot off! Engineers is valuable. Ah hell, what a war! They don't give a damn what happens to the infantry. Gravel-pushers come a dime a dozen, you don't need to rotate 'em or give 'em hazardous duty pay. They're expendable, man! Expendable!"

From further down the endless litters came the frantic cry: "Joe, Joe! get me outta here! Please get me outta here! There's *krauts* . . . get me out! Christ, Joe can't you get me out . . . I wanna live. It's dark here. I can't see! My eyes. . . . Joe, my eyes. Get me out! Joe, Joe! Get me out!"

Rumors began to race through the hospital. The *krauts* were making for Luneville, the road that passed less than fifty yards from Receiving. Two divisions were on the loose. They'd broken through, smashed a separate tank battalion and were even now clawing their way west over the helpless riflemen. The infantry was being slaughtered! Cut to ribbons by Tigers and their mounted eighty-eights!

And the image of the lumbering Tigers splashing forward in the night, long-barrelled guns swiveling slowly, turned faces pale, and everyone began to listen furtively, half expecting to hear the clanking and splashing that would herald their approach.

"Goddam it, where are our tanks?"

"No gas. Where you been, soldier, you don't know that!"

"No gas, balls! They're sitting back there with the mademoiselles letting the doughfeet fight their goddam war!"

For a while it almost seemed as if the night outside had

grown quieter. There was no longer traffic on the road though the guns in the nearby fields still erupted furiously. Then everything happened at once.

A strange officer appeared in the entrance of Surgery accompanied by a white-faced Lieutenant MacDonald. At the latter's urgent beckoning, Major Collier set down his instruments and stepped over to the two. Then he swung around, shouting, "Finish your cases immediately! Do everything absolutely necessary and let the rest go! We've got to move out at once! This is an emergency! Don't waste one minute!"

Then he issued rapid orders to MacDonald: Load all the ambulances and trucks, send for more if necessary and if possible. Dump some of the special equipment into the trucks and have the men mount as soon as the patients were loaded. When one vehicle was ready send it on out at once. No convoy. No time to convoy. They'd rendezvous in Nancy at the LXX Evacuation Hospital. Hurry! Hurry, if you don't want to spend the rest of the goddam war in some *kraut* POW camp!

Within seconds, the hospital was in an uproar. The teams working desperately over their patients heard the confused sounds of men shouting, of ambulances backing into position to load, of trucks stuck in the mud and out on the road, the sound of renewed traffic going north now and westward to escape the rapidly closing enemy trap.

Fifteen minutes later George's team finished operating and rushed out of the tent, grabbing up instruments from the open cases to salvage as they went. Then Allen's team was finished too, and went out carrying their patient on a litter themselves. As she passed Collier, Effie Newcomer cried, "For God's sake, hurry!"

"Load and get the hell out of here!" he snapped, his white face set as he worked on without even raising his eyes.

A new sound crashed across the confusion of the night as a shell exploded not far away. The echo of its muffled roar had hardly died before two more followed.

Lee's breath caught in her throat in a sudden surge of fear. Her hands began to shake as she thought of the thin canvas between them and the singing fragments of shrapnel spreading across the fields. My God, we are chained here to this table unable to run or even duck. A fourth muffled crack drowned the fading bedlam of voices and engines moving

away while the thunder of their own artillery broke out with renewed vigor. We're being caught in the crossfire.

"All right. That's it. Come on! Carry him out, Harris, Mullens! Let's get the hell out of here!" Collier's voice was calm as he grabbed Lee by the arm and shoved her violently ahead of him through the rear entrance of Surgery. The two technicians came stumbling after with their unconscious burden.

The night was alive in a huge explosion of force. Artillery thundered and flashed from the adjoining field and great claps of air blast beat against their ears as they groped their way to the remaining ambulances. Red tracers tore into the sky and antiaircraft fire blossomed in a superb display of light somewhere to the south.

Out on the dark road convoys of trucks, half-tracks, a few tanks lurched northward seeking an outlet from the thrusts of the Panzers already striking across the road to the south and threatening to shut off the road of escape to the north. Just as the hospital personnel and patients had melted away leaving empty tents and strewn equipment, so, in the next field, desperate artillerymen were racing against time to unlimber their pieces one after another while those that remained continued to fire.

"Here you are, kid! The men say you have patients in here." Collier shoved Lee roughly into the nearest of the waiting ambulances. She felt his hand press her arm hard and through the uproar caught his words, "Take care, Lee. Chin up. You'll be all right. Take care of these men and . . . of yourself. Good luck!" He slammed the door, partially cutting off the tremendous crash of sound and left her there crouching in the darkness by the metal side.

Dimly, she heard the ambulance driver shout something, the engine labored, the wheels spun fighting for traction until they lurched forward so suddenly that she was thrown heavily against the doors where she knelt looking back with wide unbelieving eyes. The black outlines of running men were silhouetted briefly by the artillery flashes, and she could see the sagging outlines of the tents clearly for seconds at a time. The Germans were shelling in earnest now, trying to reach the field artillery battery, and even as the ambulance moved out into the road, turning north, she saw a sudden burst of flame mushroom among the dark cluster of tents and tongues of flame shot up into the night.

Ed, Harris . . . they were back there still!

All thought of them was suddenly blotted from her mind as the ambulance lurched, caught by the blast of an exploding shell, and concussion drowned them with a roar. Seconds later, she heard the driver cursing, his voice edged with panic, and somewhere in the darkness a man groaned. Patients! Jesus, she thought dazedly, her ears still ringing, her head aching with the hugeness of the explosion. Where are they? With groping fingers she found the handles of two litters, one above the other, and then boots, three pairs of them side by side on the floor. Her fingers trailed across their wet muddy surface.

Flashlight . . . where is it? she wondered irritably, slapping her coverall pockets until she found the small light. Cursing her numb fingers she shielded the light carefully, turning it low along the floor until she could make out the dark shapes of the men.

"Better douse that light!" one of them warned softly.

She turned the beam down leaving herself just enough light to check bandages. On hands and knees, balancing against the rough jolting of the ambulance as it floundered and slipped in the muddy ruts of the road, she felt for pulse, dressings, checked for fresh blood. The men on the floor twisted their bodies against the heavy jolting and when she reached down among them she felt the warm wet stickiness of fresh blood.

"Which one of you is bleeding?" she asked, raising her voice above the racket.

The man on the left opened his eyes and raised his head, startled. "A nurse?" he asked.

"Yes. Are you bleeding?"

"No, not me," he replied weakly. "I think it's this one. He's out cold. There's blood on my cheek . . ."

"Driver!" she shouted, howling above the noise of guns and engine and creaking banging metal, "Driver, is there an aid kit?"

"Yes, ma'am!" he screamed back, "between the seats. I can't stop! Gotta get the hell outta here! This goddam road is hot!"

"Maybe I can help you," came from one of the wounded. "Here it is, I guess." She heard the scrape of metal along the floor.

"Be careful. I can get it now, thanks." She braced herself and dousing the light reached for the box. Its weight gave her wrist a sharp twinge of pain but she was able to lift it

toward her. "Thanks. Now one thing more, can you tell where he's bleeding?"

"I don't know."

"It's his head, ma'am," a second voice spoke out of the darkness. "I can feel blood all over his head. The bandage is wet with it!"

"Damn! That's lousy luck. How about you?"

"I'm okay. This darned ambulance sure can bounce!"

Now, she thought, for the two men on the litters and then I'll have to do something for that head, if I can ever get to him. Shading the flashlight carefully with the palm of her hand, she switched it on again. The man in the lower litter smiled wanly, opening his mouth to whisper something that was lost in the noise. She took his pulse and checked the ungainly abdominal dressings, the leg in traction and was grateful to find them dry. She'd have to watch him though, his pulse wasn't good. Maybe I ought to give him morphine, she thought, noting the lines of pain about his mouth, and the clenching and unclenching of his fists over the blanket. First, though, she must care for the man on top.

Cautiously, she dragged herself upright, bracing herself against the wild swing and jolt of the speeding ambulance. She flashed the light quickly, it took only seconds to glimpse the gray face lolling back and forth, the open, upturned eyes reflected in the dim light, the one arm, hand open and gray with filth, hanging over the edge of the blanket. Mechanically, she reached for the pulse. The hand was already cold. He probably died even before he reached our field, she thought. No one had had a chance to check this ambulance in or they would have found him dead on arrival. Well . . . she let the limp arm fall back onto the litter and started to lower herself to the floor again when a shell whistled out of nowhere, rushing across the rain-sodden land.

For a second in time they seemed suspended in its huge engulfing blast as if a mighty hand slapped savagely against the ambulance, heaving it sideways like a toy. The dark cabin filled with a tremendous ringing; it bucked and swayed throwing her heavily to the floor. There was a ripping sound and the tinkle of broken glass, and in the aftermath of concussion, a cry of pain. The driver cursed in a high shrill yelp of fear, and the cry came again, urgent now.

As if in a nightmare of sound and motion Lee struggled to free herself from the man groaning beneath her. Somehow,

she managed to push herself backward to the tiny, cleared space by the door and began fumbling for her fallen flashlight. Her head throbbed painfully and she raised a trembling hand to feel blood oozing from her forehead. Then she realized that the ambulance had ceased its jolting though the motor still roared and strained, and the tires still whined in mud.

"Jesus Christ! We're stuck! We gotta get outta here!" the driver shouted, panic shrilling his voice. He gunned the motor, trying to rock the stuck ambulance from the mud and one of the wounded groaned in pain. Then they were moving forward, inch by inch, and all of them waited in darkness, holding their breath, ears still ringing. They waited for the second and third shell that would surely come, then the tires caught on solid ground and the ambulance leaped forward. They were gaining speed and on the road again.

Lee let go her breath and resumed her search for the light. Where was the damn thing? God, I've got to find it! One man, at least, was badly hurt. . . . Ah. Her hand closed on the cold metal. In the dim light she found the three on the floor trying to extricate themselves from each other. To add to their confusion a blanket had slipped from the upper litter and fallen across their heads. She leaned over to help them when something struck sharply across her face.

Recoiling, she swung the light upward, forgetting caution in her fright. The head and shoulders of the dead man were thrown half clear of the litter; the body itself held partially in place by the boots caught in the litter straps. The dead arms flailed back and forth with the motion of the ambulance, dully striking the metal sides and occasionally brushing the face of the man below who, even in a delirium of pain, shrank back from contact with this lifeless flesh. His living groans mingled with the malevolent blows of the dead.

Panic-stricken, she struggled with the inert body until she got it crammed back onto the litter. Then she turned her attention to the man below. The bandages, dry only minutes before, were now soaked with thick wet blood. The torn abdominal wound had reopened and even as she checked, new blood spread over the white padding of the pressure bandages, blood and vomit dribbled from the corners of his gasping mouth, and his eyes, staring up into the shadowed light, were filled with sick fear. He tried to speak, but a bubble of stained mucous broke from his lips instead.

Somehow, she thought, I'll have to get plasma started and

started quickly. She fumbled in the kit for the plasma can.

"Nurse, could I hold the light for you?"

Gratefully she turned to the quiet voice beside her. He was braced on one elbow, his face sweat-streaked with the pain of the jolting ambulance. But he grinned at her reassuringly and held out his hand. She felt immense relief at the knowledge that she had help, no matter how limited.

"Hey, Lieutenant, that light!" the driver warned, his voice still holding panic.

"I've got to use it," she replied curtly. "One of these men is pretty . . ." she stopped, aware of the frightened eyes below her, and got to work. The hell with the driver and his fear. If they were going to be hit it wouldn't be because someone was aiming at them.

After what seemed like hours of futility she finally managed to get the needle into the vein and she secured the tube firmly to the wounded man's arm with long strips of adhesive. Then she hung the plasma bottle on the litter above, trying to ignore, as she fastened it, the black gaping mouth in the dead-gray face. She made the dressings as firm as she could, added fresh gauze. As a last measure, she slipped a syrette of morphine into the muscles of the lax arm. There was nothing else that she could do. Once again she had an unpleasant feeling of helplessness until she remembered the head wound case on the floor.

There was little enough she could do for him. Reading his medical tag by the uncertain light, she found that he had never been through surgery. His wound was caused by a rifle bullet and he'd had plasma and penicillin at the aid station. However his pulse was fairly strong and the seep of blood, while steady, was not great, so she strengthened his bandage and wrapped the dead man's blanket beneath his head to cushion it against the shocks and bumps. She decided to keep the second and last can of plasma for the hemorrhaging man.

Then she re-checked the other two and found them in fair shape though in misery from the rough jouncing. She used her morphine freely and did her best to make them comfortable. As she worked, she gradually became aware that the crack and boom of artillery had died away; there was only the rumble of their engine, the whine of the tires and the rain drumming against the metal cabin. They were fairly flying down the road. It was difficult for her to maintain her balance as she worked. The motion was increasingly painful

for the wounded. Finally, goaded by their white, pain-sharpened faces and muffled groans, she called to the driver, "Can't you slow down a little now? These men are in pain!"

He eased up almost imperceptibly, on the accelerator. "We gotta get off this road. There's *beaucoup krauts* behind us and I heard they was trying to cut off the road up ahead. Soon as I get to the turnoff to Nancy I'll slow down but I gotta . . ."

"How much further?" she interrupted.

"Don't know . . . fifty kilometers, maybe."

Oh damn! She turned back to the man on the lower litter. Would he last that long? In the shaded light she saw that the fresh gauze she had applied only minutes before was sodden with blood, and reluctantly she turned the light upon his face. Oh damn! Damn!

His skin was the color of gray muslin and blood was flowing in a thin trickle from the corner of his mouth. With every lurch of the ambulance he gave a hollow half cough, half groan and blood welled again to his lips. He was still conscious but obviously very weak.

She glanced down at her watch. Only a little over forty minutes from the hospital field. Forty minutes of this nightmare! Through the rain-slashed window by her face she could still see flashes of artillery and an occasional red flight of tracers arching through blackness. Rain drummed against the ambulance and the wind rocked the long metal body in its violent gusts across the road. Once she thought that she saw blue lights following; perhaps a truck or another ambulance racing after them along the road to safety. Maybe it's Ed and the others, she said to herself, drawing a deep breath, and turned back to her job, conscious for a second of the foul smell of blood and sweat and urine that pervaded the close cabin.

"Here's the turnoff, Lieutenant!" the driver yelled suddenly. His voice was shrill with relief as he swung the ambulance to the left.

"How much . . . ?" she began but broke off at the gurgling sound coming from the lower litter. She switched on her light again just as blood bubbled through his shivering lips. His breathing grew harsh and difficult. The two men on the floor shuddered involuntarily as the ugly sound filled the dark, congested cabin.

"Christ, he's bad, isn't he?" one muttered fearfully while the other whistled softly beneath his breath.

"Driver, can't you stop?" she cried distractedly.

"I ain't no whiz at this here war, Lieutenant, but I'd say we oughta get on some. I'd say there was tanks doing that shelling back there and where there's tanks it's a hell of a lot better to make some distance between 'em and you."

"He's right, Nurse." The drawl came softly, calm and reassuring again.

"We just can't stop, Lieutenant."

"All right. All right," she cried, unnerved by her responsibility.

"Let me hold the light for you again."

Fighting panic she handed him the flashlight and bent over the bottom litter. She broke open a package of four-by-fours, wetting several of them with water from her canteen, and using them to wipe the filth and blood from the desperately wounded man's lips. At the touch of the damp gauze he moved his head weakly. His eyes opened slightly, glazed and frightened, and panic washed over her again. What can I do? she wondered helplessly. I haven't even courage to give him.

The ambulance bounced heavily across a section of broken pavement; she was thrown against a metal litter support while a cry of pure agony was torn from the dying man's throat. His choking breath filled the cabin, grew louder and more desperate, an ugly rasping sound that rose above the throbbing engine, the faraway retreating guns. The driver heard it. He slowed the ambulance and swung off on the road's shoulder. Switching off the motor he leapt from his seat to signal any following traffic away with his blue light.

With the sudden cessation of the motor, with the end to jolting and the creak of metal, the three listeners were drowned in the rattling, whispered breath, and the dark cabin was filled with the sound and the sense of struggle. Even as the labored breathing reached a climax a blast of rain-chill wind blew through the open front door to lay damp fingers on the flesh of the living.

"Christ Almighty!"

The light wavered, played briefly on the dying man's face, then slid off to the dark metal blank of the wall. The arm beneath Lee's hand jerked spasmodically, and under her fingertips she felt life drain away. The hoarse breath caught, gurgled, seemed to fill with blood.

"The light!"

The dim beam came back to the blanketed form, struck the pallid face as a reddish, black mass burst from the colorless lips to break in small streams down the slowly relaxing chin. It

gleamed dully black in the dim light as they listened and watched life go out beside them in their strange cramped haven, and they held their breath with his, timing his rattle and gasp, holding theirs till his lungs filled and slowly collapsed.

As silence filled the cabin Lee leaned back, her shoulder against the cold metal of the door. She let the limp arm slip away, hearing the slow release as the other men began to breathe again. Wearily she ran trembling fingers through her hair pushing back damp strands from a forehead that was cold with sweat.

The light flicked off. "The driver," a voice reminded her.

"Yes. All right," she took the flashlight from him and rapped with it against the glass. A second later the driver was in his seat, slamming the door on the chill touch of wind and rain. As he started the motor he asked over his shoulder, "How about . . . him?"

"He's dead. Look, we've got another one that's bad. If you can hurry without jolting so much . . ."

"Okay, Lieutenant. We'll make it, don'cha worry."

I won't worry, she thought tiredly. I can't do anything anyway.

Seconds later they were bouncing along the rough road again. Looking back Lee saw only darkness; no more lightning flashes of artillery, no dim following lights. They seemed alone on the road, alone in the night. Absently, she peered at the luminous dial of her watch. A minute or so before two. Only an hour out here, only an hour . . .

"Did that close one hit him, Nurse?" the low voice penetrated her exhaustion.

"No, I don't think so. I think the jarring re-opened his wounds. I couldn't stop the bleeding. It was internal."

"It's damned odd to be alive one minute and dead the next, isn't it?" he mused. "I wonder if a fellow knows what's happening. I guess he does, doesn't he, Nurse?"

Yes, she thought, oh yes he does. He knows it's there ahead of him, one terrible hour that is his alone. I've seen the knowledge of it too often now. The tragedy, she thought, is that they all die young and they are all so filled with an unbearable desire to live. They aren't wasted and wearied by years or disease; life holds so much for them still, known and unknown, and in their eyes I can see the regret. They aren't ready yet to be gone.

Time passed slowly in the moving darkness, in the pitching, jolting night; time passed familiarly as she fumbled about in the

dim light, talking to reassure, working to save precious blood and strength. Anxiously she watched pale faces for tell-tale signs of shock, watched lips drawn and thinned with pain as the wheels jolted in muddy ruts, listened for a quickening breath and felt for a weakening pulse. Her back ached, her knees were bruised and sore. Above her head the dead arm slipped again from the upper litter and swung back and forth to thud dully against the ambulance side, but she was far too weary to stop the beat of inanimate flesh against steel.

The men began to curse, softly at first but as time went on, with increasing hysteria, increasing obscenity. They cursed the German steel imbedded in their bodies, they cursed the deep holes in the road that threw the ambulance sideways in sickening lurches and brought gasps of pain to their lips, they cursed the army, the war, the night, and even, occasionally their God. Most often, they cursed the dead hand slapping rhythmically above their heads.

Then the driver's voice rose exultantly, "Christ Almighty! We made it! Here's the MPs, boys, here's the damned MPs."

The ambulance slowed, came to a gentle stop, and the driver rolled down the window to shout hasty questions into the night. An answering voice came faintly out of nowhere to the ears of the dazed passengers:

"You gotta go on up to the LXX Evac, bud. It's the one on top of the hill. Turn left here, go on up straight to the top and it's on your right. Big monastery with a stone wall and a couple of iron gates. You can't miss it, chum!"

The ambulance started off again, tires humming musically on the pavement, along the wide, deserted streets of Nancy. Finally, it turned up a graveled drive and drew to a gentle halt. There was a moment of unbelievable quiet as the motor died, and then quick voices broke beyond the door. Someone jerked open the door, the step clanged down into place, and a dark figure loomed against the faint light, peering into the fetid depths of the cabin. Dreamlike, Lee crawled to the step, her body so stiff and cramped that she could scarcely move. Except for the sudden arm that caught her she would have fallen forward onto the gravel drive.

"Watch it! Oh! Easy does it, ma'am."

Cool fresh air struck her face and she breathed deeply, gratefully. She did not hear the questioning voice until it grew rough with impatience.

"What gives here? You a nurse, ma'am?"

"Oh!" With a start she remembered. "You'll have to get litters. The three on the floor are badly hurt, especially the middle man. Those two on the litters are dead. Please hurry . . . it's been a long ride." And she leaned utterly exhausted against the open ambulance door waiting as they went for litters and bearers. She waited until the three men were gently transferred; she waited even until they took the dead away. She didn't ever want to move out of the cool damp night with its gusts of fresh wild wind. She just wanted to lean there against the door of her stinking prison and breathe.

"Christ, will you look at the blood! Watch it! The goddam floor is slippery as hell!"

She heard a muffled curse as boots slipped and a head slammed hard against metal. Yes . . . blood, plenty of blood.

"This man's out colder than a duck! Watch his head there, Mac. It's bad. Slip that damned litter under him. Jesus Christ, man, watch his head!"

"You'd better come on in, ma'am. Talk to the receiving officer."

Wearily she straightened and followed the bearers up a short flight of steps through a canvas blackout flap hung over the wide entrance. She felt a little dizzy and sick as she left the cool night behind and stepped into a hall filled with dazzling light. Squinting against the sudden glare, she followed the bearers numbly as they tilted their burdens around corners. The backs of her legs felt heavy as lead and her head ached dully. Head down, eyes half closed against the bright light, she saw, first, the marble floor tracked and smeared with mud and water brought in by countless boots, heard the murmur of voices, the heavy difficult breathing of the wounded, the thump of boots and the restless movements of men trying to ease their pain. She raised her head and saw that she was in a big room, the floor literally carpeted by litters. There was barely room between them for the corpsmen to move about, and here and there the marble floor was fouled with small rusty pools of blood.

It was so familiar that for a second she could only stand there blinking, hardly believing that here again was the universal sagging line of men, the tangle of litters covered with dirty-brown blankets that overlaid filthy, stained flesh, the pale faces, cigarettes dangling from cracked lips, the stubbled cheeks and dirty mud-daubed lank hair and the feverish eyes—always the feverish too bright eyes of the combat men. A great white-robed

Jesus soared outward from a niche at the end of the room; the carved face reflecting the agony of the human faces below.

I'm back, she thought dazedly.

Someone approached, spoke to her, the words coming from far away. With an effort she roused herself, saying "What?", trying to listen and sort out the questions, her own answers coming through a fog of fatigue. Then like an obedient dog who minds without comprehension, she followed a corpsman out into the chill, strange halls, endless white corridors with arched cement ceilings. Where was this? What? Another carved Jesus, on a smaller scale, bent outward from a sterile niche, outspread arms soaring in black shadow. She flinched. "What? What?"

A plump nurse, a captain, rose from behind a lighted desk while beyond the small circle of its light, Lee was aware of cots draped with blankets, and the rise and fall of breathing. The pear-shaped little captain bustled her once more into the chill, eerie halls, and up the circular stair with a carved, wooden balustrade. A third niche-bound Christ was at the curve of the steps. The older woman's tongue clucked and clacked, pouring out a stream of questions and talk that Lee neither fully heard nor understood. To her intense relief a door was finally thrown open and she saw a bed, blankets, a single chair. Her companion fussed about a moment more, then left her saying that she must leave the corridor door open for light because this was a monk's cell; very primitive you see, very austere.

When at last the sound of her footsteps on the stone hall floor had died away, Lee shut the door quickly and stood in darkness listening to the exhausted drumming of her heart. With a sigh she moved slowly away from the door, found the bed, stripped off her boots, socks, coveralls and crawled painfully, like a wounded animal, into the safety of the cot. She felt strangely devoid of substance; light and airy and yet unaccountably weighted. She was briefly aware of the blood and dirt encrusted on her hands, stiff in the skin of her face. A wave of revulsion flowed over her.

Perhaps, I ought to get up, find the latrine, she thought. Perhaps. . . . But she was too tired. Her eyes closed and irresistible sleep plunged her headfirst into darkness.

CHAPTER 19

The late afternoon sun streamed through the deep casement windows. The room was cold and still, drowsing in the unshadowed whiteness of its limed cement walls.

What is this cell? How did I get here? Where is the sound of wind in loose canvas, where is the rain, the mud, the grass under my cot, my bed roll?

Lee propped herself up on one elbow staring at the pattern of sunlight bright on the drab blankets, bright on the white wall. She listened to the cool dazzling afternoon stirring with the sound of leaves, distant voices, and the clatter of a mess hall beyond her open window.

Of course! This was Nancy. This was the evacuation hospital at the monastery on the hill. With a sigh of relief she pulled the blankets closer around her bare shoulders and lay back, letting the peace of the room steal over her again. Unadorned and unfurnished except for the cot on which she lay and a single wooden chair, the room was a cell, a white concrete cell. She lay basking in its sterile whiteness, the warmth of her body beneath the blankets and the bright cheerful sunlight dancing on the wall. A feeling of security stole over her. If I never left this odd little cell, she thought, if I never opened that door and stepped outside it, I'd be safe. Nothing could reach me. Here I could lie in the sun day after day, through November, December; through the whole damn war and none of it could touch me again. I'd never have to show pity or be afraid, I'd never have to see Ed or Bill or anyone again, I'd never have to think or feel or even wonder if I were going slowly mad.

But it was impossible, wasn't it, to hide in a cell?

She raised her arms to stretch luxuriously only to halt midway, holding her hands out before her to stare at the blood dried in the cracks of her skin. God, I'm filthy! Filthy with the blood of the dead. And she pushed her hands out into the pattern of sunlight lying warmly across the blankets. How strange to be able to lie in warmth and stillness and feel the slow beat of your heart and your own blood surge through

your veins and at the same time carry upon you the blood of another! If that shell had struck the ambulance perhaps my own blood would be dried in the cracks of someone's skin and myself . . . something mutilated and torn and beginning to rot somewhere back there on that dark road. She shivered, thinking, after all, that this cell of refuge was too still, too white, too sterile and unreal.

In the end she had little time for brooding because later that afternoon, just before evening chow, the chief nurse came for her, announcing that they had assigned her to night duty on one of the wards. The evacuation hospital was swamped with wounded from two divisions that were overrun at Luneville.

"The X Division casualties are very high," the older woman explained. "The men say the German tanks ran right over them before they knew what was happening, and they had no way of stopping them anyway. It's such a shame! Just when everything seemed to be going so well."

For the first time, Lee thought of Stainer in relation to all that had happened. The image of his sullen, handsome face rose before her and beyond it, the lumbering silhouette of a German tank. I forgot, she thought in dismay. I forgot him, too.

She had little time to think about him in the week that followed. The duty shifts on the ward were twelve hours, and she was still so exhausted that she spent her off-duty time in drugged sleep. Then Collier came.

"We pick you up tomorrow morning, early. There's going to be a big jumpoff, we'll be on the move again, kid," he told her.

"Where is everybody? Are they all okay? How did you get away that night?"

"Everybody? Us?" he sighed and pressed his thin fingers against his temples. "Well, I'll tell you, baby, everybody's scattered around with the four evacs here in Nancy. Most of them are across town at that big seven-hundred bed setup near army headquarters. They all made it out except for Samuels and Pedro; they were wounded by shrapnel fragments and were sent back to the First General, I guess, in Paris. One ambulance went into a ditch and had to be hauled out later. How did we get away? On a wing and a prayer, I suppose," he grinned wryly. "We got a couple of holes in our jeep to show

for it, too. Did you get a chance to rest, kid? You don't look so hot."

She had to admit that she hadn't rested, not exactly.

But he was already preoccupied. "Well, then, tomorrow." He started to move away, paused, slapping the pockets of his jacket. "Wait a minute, I have a couple of letters for you." He handed them over, crumpled and soiled and stained, and was gone.

One was a note from Stainer. She read it first, quickly and with relief. He was all right, his luck was holding, he was tired, and tomorrow they would receive replacements and go back. He was sorry, sorry as hell, that he wouldn't have the chance to see her but he was all right, he was damned lucky, as usual.

There were two from China, long letters written by her husband in the comparative peace of a rest camp, and so, full of reminiscences and of hope. He wrote of their future, he wrote of the day when they would both come home; he wrote of love and desire. Yet she read his letters unmoved for they seemed those of a stranger, and when she was finished she shoved them deep into a pocket of her coveralls and forgot them.

They dismissed her from duty at midnight for she had to leave at five. She was asleep when the first distant rumble rose along the horizon. She slept on as it grew to the full-throated roar of a huge barrage, a great concentrated artillery strike that heralded the all-out attack jumping off toward the outer approaches of the Siegfried Line.

She woke at dawn. As she walked out to the waiting ambulance and joined the other nurses of the First Platoon, it was like the slamming of a thousand doors.

The hospital convoy moved slowly. It was a bleak wind-torn day and they were forced to move cautiously down the narrow lanes marked with signs reading: "Mines Cleared to Ditches," and the occasional tapes that fluttered ominously in the wind. Each mile took them deeper into the area of stalemated war with its countless water-filled foxholes, muddy craters, and the scattered shells of abandoned vehicles. Bombed and shelled towns had become piles of rubble, blocking narrow streets. The empty walls leaned wearily into the wind—eerie, hollow heaps from which people had long since fled.

In the dark tangle of a dripping forest the ambulance wheels slipped and bounced, and a weird pattern of war appeared

under the gaunt trees. Two burned-out tanks, a Sherman and a Tiger, crouched in the underbrush, their guns almost touching and leveled at each other's shattered turrets. The wide tracks of their treads in the muddy thickets told of an odd quirk of combat that had brought the American plowing into the forest to surprise the German in its ambush. Retreat had evidently been impossible for either of them, and so at point-blank range, they had knocked each other out of the war.

The fields beyond the forest were torn and churned. Vehicle tracks scarred the land marching through brush and dead grass and over the bleak hills. Along the top of a long rise, three Sherman tanks stood, their gun muzzles turned uselessly toward the ground, their steel walls gaping where armor-piercing shells had torn the metal in jagged, blackened holes. Several half-tracks lay overturned in the roadside ditches, their treads spun off and half buried in the mud. Nearby was a jagged shapeless mass of twisted metal that had once been an artillery piece.

A little later, the convoy passed several weapons carriers parked beside the road, and a group of men were gathered there around the blackened hull of an American tank, taking out the dead, one by one. And further the convoy stopped while half a dozen men climbed out to remove the carcass of a heavy draft horse from the road.

Just as dusk drew over the desolate land, bringing a deeper shade of gray to the universal dreariness that cloaked the shadowy shells of tanks and crumpled vehicles, the muddy liquid road, the bare shell-pruned trees, the convoy turned into an old French cavalry post that was designated on the large maps at Division Headquarters as Hospital Area, First Platoon, X Field Hospital.

There was a moment of shocked silence after they descended stiffly from their vehicles. They stood in small groups gazing forlornly about them in the rain. The old post was a shambles. Its once brick barracks were a ruin of smashed stone and protruding beams. All that was left of the thirty-odd buildings that had stood with military precision up and down the cobbled streets was a single hulking shadow by the gate. The rest had been shelled or bombed out of all resemblance to any sort of structure. The lovely poplars that had once lined the streets were a mass of splintered trunks and branches under which lay the twisted shapes of wrecked vehicles, and here and there sprawled the sodden carcasses of the post's once famous mounts.

Over everything the rain came down, dripping from the fallen roofs and broken walls to splash noisily in shallow puddles trapped among the glistening stones.

"All right. Get a move on, you men," Collier's harsh voice cut across their common misery. "There's work to be done!"

Reluctantly, they moved to the task of unloading and setting up the unit. With fingers numbed by cold the men unlashed the crates of instruments and supplies, and handed them down to others to carry into the gloom of the single remaining building. Water leaked through cracked ceilings, ran down the mouldy plaster of the walls, the wind moaned through the glassless windows and stirred among the indescribable debris that littered the narrow corridors and rooms.

"First the *krauts;* then the Yanks!" Mason said, pointing to a pile of strange shaped objects scattered among K-ration boxes and cigarette wrappers. "Look at those *kraut* potato mashers! Christ, don't you females go fooling around with those babies! You'd bring what's left of this trap right down on our heads!"

"Sergeant Morris, have a couple of men detailed to carry those grenades out immediately. Get 'em stashed somewhere away from this building and in a sheltered place," Collier ordered from across the room. "And send a detail into the cellars right away. Have them look for anything strange or out of place, barrels, wires, pipes, anything that might possibly be or contain a time bomb. You'd better use at least eight men, and for God's sake, make them be careful! This area is lousy with mined buildings!"

Lee shuddered faintly, remembering some of the stories she had heard in Nancy about whole towns that had been mined by the retreating Germans to go up with a roar just as an outfit had settled down to bivouac. Effie's heavy voice, disturbed and angry, brought Lee up short, "Hey, baby, go on out to the trucks and see can you rustle us up some brooms. We gotta clean out this stinking mess before we set up in here. Phew! Whatta mess! Ed says we gotta hurry, may be patients within the hour. Goddam it, he may be right and all that but he needn't chew me like it's my fault!"

Just then Collier's voice raged in the hall.

"He is bad, isn't he?" Lee said with sinking heart, remembering the last time he'd lashed them so cruelly. Nothing was changed then.

"Yeah," her chief replied with a sigh. "He's been worse

than ever. You were damned lucky to be out of it, kid. We took a beating over there at the LXX Evac, believe me. The man's gone pure S.O.B. I don't see why in the hell they didn't transfer him or at least give him a leave while they had the chance, but that ain't none of our business. Anyway he did a damned fine job of getting us evacuated that night. I heard a rumor somebody might give him some sorta medal for it. Ha! Well, run along, kid and get those brooms."

Lee nodded and ran out into the dank cheerless corridor where she had to dodge men sweating and tugging at crates or half-running through the narrow hall, their arms piled with cots and blankets. At the outer door she paused, hearing the hoarse, somewhat mournful cursing of the men, the drip of rain and the shrill sigh of the wind whistling down the rubble-filled streets of the old post and among the ruined trees.

"Excuse me, Miss Lee."

She turned to see a young thin-faced private standing at her shoulder, his arms raised to his chest to shelter the two grenades he carried.

"Oh! Yes, George." She backed against the wall to let him edge past, and after him, a second man who also gingerly cradled grenades in his arms.

"Watch it there, George!" one of the men by the trucks shouted as the young soldier half-stumbled, half-ran down the steps in obvious eagerness to be rid of his load.

"Hey George, don't you drop one of them *kraut* mashers. Liable to scramble you, boy!"

"Don't you lay one of them goddam eggs near this truck, man!"

Raucous laughter followed above the splashing of the rain as white-faced and frightened, George scuttled off followed by his comrade. Poor kid, Lee thought. He doesn't know they won't go off even if you drop them.

"Come on! Hurry it up, you guys! The major will be out here to knock your ears back! Joe, get the lead outta your pants! He'll ream the hell outta us for sure!" The tone was brutal, typical of the hatred and anger that was infecting the whole platoon. It was clear proof of what was happening to them all under the constant riding, the constant demands. Collier's fits of rage broke over the most trivial of mistakes. After being away Lee could see it more clearly now. She was even able to understand why no one had spoken up for her the night Captain Allen had virtually called her Collier's

mistress. Panic and truculent despair had ridden roughshod through the unit until no one wanted to become involved in anything that concerned the CO.

"You looking for something, Lieutenant?"

"What we got you want, Lee?"

"Have you gotten down to the brooms yet, Tommy?"

"Why sure! Where's the K.P. gear, Mac? She's gotta police up. Pass 'em forward, man."

Wheels splashed suddenly on the puddles of the cobblestones as an ambulance swung slowly through the impressive gate, all that remained intact of the big and ancient barracks. The driver stuck his head out of his window. "Hey, soldier, is this the First Platoon, X Field Hospital?"

"Yeah! Yeah, bud. You got patients?"

"Hell yes! Move that crate outta there. These boys I got won't wait!"

"My God!" Lee whispered to herself. Ed was infallible! She grabbed her brooms and ran back up the steps, down the gloomy hall, dodging again the hurrying corpsmen who were lashed on by the CO's curses.

"Effie!" she cried breathlessly as she turned into the room that was to be Surgery. "Effie, we've got patients! There's an . . ." She broke off abruptly as Collier came in behind her.

"Patients?" he said with a withering look. The corners of his mouth curled with contempt and he all but spat. "Patients? What the hell did you expect with the Division jumping off on one of the biggest attacks of the war?" He turned his back on her in dismissal. "Effie, when you get a chance will you have a separate ward set up for the trench-foot cases? I want you to get MacDonald to assign two corpsmen for it and have one of the nurses cover it regularly. Mason will be doctor in charge. Hey!" He swung around to shout at two men struggling to maneuver a huge supply crate through the door. "Get that damned thing the hell out of here! I told you to leave everything in the corridor until this place is swept and the canvas down. Christ, you idiots, back up!"

Sally Hawks whispered in Lee's ear as they plied their brooms, "I heard one of the boys say that he'd kill him if he didn't quit chewing them out. He said that, Lee . . . Do you suppose . . ."

"I wouldn't be surprised!" Lee interrupted grimly. "But darn it, Sal, Ed's right. We've got patients, and even Mason thought that the men should have dinner first before we

set up. My God, look at this mess!" She brushed angrily at the filthy cement floor with its damp patches of mud and dirt defying her broom.

"Maybe we could wash it off. But I guess there's no water . . ."

"Don't fret about it, Sal." Effie came up beside them. "Just chase the worst of it out but for God's sake, hurry! If they'd only set the goddam lights up. Here, give me that a moment, Sal. You start carrying out that pile of trash yonder."

Out in the hall someone let the end of a crate drop with a heavy crash and instantly Collier's harsh voice cried out, "You goddam clumsy ox! Get under that or I . . ." but the raging voice was lost as the portable generator started up outside the broken windows, and half a dozen bulbs strung overhead flashed on. It was possible now to see the extent of the filth caking floor and walls, the dark patches of moisture staining the ceiling, and the threatening sag of it over half the room.

"Whew!" the chief nurse whistled. "Looks like this place was shook up some! Hope it don't collapse on our heads. Wonder where the hell we're going to sleep?"

"I don't expect that matters much," Lee answered and felt a flush of shame. "Not that it should," she added hastily. "I don't expect we'll have much chance for awhile."

" 'Tis truly said. If ambulances are coming in we'll be lucky if we even get a chance to eat, and right now I could eat a horse! No wonder the poor lads are dropping things. They're hollow inside. Ed may be right about the patients and getting set up at once, he sure as hell is right but, right or not, the boys can't operate on his hot air and he oughta know it. Ah, what the hell! Maybe the *krauts* will come along and send us packing back to Nancy." For a moment Effie considered the idea wistfully even as she swept with vigor at the dirt.

Lee laughed.

"Effie! See if you can get Pollard to figure some way to drape the canvas at least halfway up these walls!" Collier was there beside them and gone again before they had turned around.

"Christ, now how long was he standing there?" Effie muttered, sweat pouring down her broad red face as her arms moved rhythmically with the broom. "In again, out again! Keeps us on our toes, eh? Scared the hell outta me though. Best to keep my big trap shut and you, yours, dearie. Hey, Pollard . . ."

Lee bent again to her sweeping. Hurry! Hurry! Get set up! Get sterilized! Patients waiting already on litters in the chill halls; badly wounded men waiting while she swept a floor. Hurry your fingers, your breath, and forget that you're starving, that your back aches and that your legs are like lead. Hurry, hurry, hurry, hurry right into your grave. And the worst of it was, no matter how much you resented the raging voice, the sneers, the furious eyes and the snarls that were screamed over your head, he was right. He *was* right!

"Okay, boys, come in with your canvas," the chief nurse shouted, "Lee, you set up over there by the wall. Ach, my aching back! Hey, Johnnie boy, bring in our gear and make with the tables, dearie."

Hurry, hurry, hurry!

A minute later, Lee ran out into the hall only dimly lit by a few naked bulbs strung along the ceiling, and was shocked to see the long rows of litters near the left wall. Silent and rigid, the men lay under their blankets and waited as corpsmen rushed past them, carrying cots and crates down the narrow corridor. The odor of boiling coffee drifting down the dank cold halls made Lee's stomach churn.

She almost fell over her two technicians as she started down the hall. "Oh, here you are, Mullens, Harris. I was looking for you. It's . . ."

Startled, they peered at her. "What's up? Something wrong?"

"Relax, but if you know what's good for you you'll come along and help me set up pronto."

"Oh." Visibly, they both relaxed.

"Say, Lee . . ." Mullens leaned close, lowering his voice to a whisper, "say, is the major okay, you think? I been watching him and he seems nervous as a cat. He can't hardly light a cigarette! It won't be like before, d'you think?"

"Of course not!" she replied sharply. "You boys tend to your own business or we'll all be in the soup." She felt rather than heard the edge of doubt creep into her voice.

"Okay, okay, now don't you start chewing us, too! I was only asking."

"Sure, I know. But for heaven's sake, hurry and get us set up!" She looked off down the hall. It was so damned dim in here. I'll have trouble trying to check them, she thought, much less read their tags in this light. I'd better find my flashlight while I've got the chance. "Look, you go on ahead and start

our stuff in. We set up next to the right wall. I'm going after my flashlight . . . if anybody asks. I'll be right back."

"Sure. If he starts raising hell we'll tell him." Mullens gave her a conspiratorial look and Harris laughed.

She had to smile. They were right, she thought ruefully. Either way, we can't win.

Someone jostled against her heavily.

"Oh, hi there, Lee." Mason's voice boomed. "Where're you going in such a damned hurry?"

"I'm being a hero, Tim. I'm risking my neck to get my flashlight from my gear in the ambulance. If he misses me I'm as good as shot at sunrise!"

To her surprise Tim didn't laugh. Instead, he said in a low serious voice: "Don't blame him too much, kid. Don't you join with the rest of the vultures and help to ruin him. He needs what support he's got left, you know. It's been a damned, long, hard road."

Startled at the gravity of his voice and ashamed of her own shabby cynicism, she replied contritely. "I know, Tim. I shouldn't . . . but it's hard not to get mad and . . . well confused."

"Sure. We all do that. But look at it this way, if he wasn't here to keep us at it, we wouldn't be able to hold this pace. We have to though for the sake of our consciences and he has to make us. It's necessary and he's necessary though we hate him for it."

"I know, Tim, but it's different now. Everyone is getting so nervous and upset, so jumpy they can hardly do anything right, at least not to suit him. I can't."

"Yes, it's different now," he replied soberly. "It's different because we've all come too far. Perhaps, we're near the end. I don't know. Everything's pretty damned confused." He shook his head, musing.

"I'm afraid he's sick," she burst out miserably. "That's what I'm afraid of, Tim. I think he's really sick and I think he knows it, only he is trying to fight it down when . . . when he can't. No one could. Not any more."

Mason was silent for a moment, then said slowly, "Yes, you may be right. You know, Lee, I had to tell him about his patient that night. I had to tell him that the man died. I was afraid if I didn't someone else would. He was stunned, then began to tell me how it was a hopeless case to start with. That's true enough, of course, but . . ."

"Why don't they send him back?" she cried.

"I think they tried pretty hard to talk him into it. They offered him chief surgeon in a general back in Paris and a promotion to boot. The trouble is, he feels that he's needed, he feels that he can't quit so long as the war is on. Something about guilt . . . he once told me . . ."

Yes, guilt, she thought. The one thing he is afraid to face. Before it he turns coward or hero whichever way you care to look at it. Aloud, she said, "I've got to go, Tim. My God, if he finds I'm gone. . . ."

"Go ahead, kid. And don't worry, something will come up."

Oh yes, will it?

She ran off and three minutes later was back in Surgery, relieved to find that Collier was not there.

CHAPTER 20

Icy winds struck out of the north to moan and whistle forlornly through the shattered cavalry post. They sent rain and sleet slashing hard against the cobbled streets, and later snow flew over the blasted heaps of stone, the lone walls. Icy fingers of winter moved among the battered lindens, searched out broken windows to chill and numb the members of the First Platoon at their work, to bring added misery to the wounded lying row on row in the dank, gloomy room that served as Receiving.

Mud froze solidly in the fields. Deep ruts grew permanent on the roads and the clay edges of abandoned foxholes crumbled in the cold. To the east the fighting grew difficult and indefinite. Third Army armored columns pushed forward slowly, meeting determined resistance now that the defenses of the Fatherland were being assaulted. Rifle companies, some of them only at half strength, bore the brunt of battle around mired tanks. Replacements, so badly needed now, failed to materialize. Weary men who for weeks had been holding the stalemated areas east of the Moselle, who had pushed off on the big attack to the Siegfried Line, were falling victim to the all-pervading trench foot, pneumonia and exhaustion.

With filled lungs and swollen blackened feet they came pouring back to the hospitals. Trench foot was good for

several weeks of hot food, sheets and a bed; warmth and rest and safety. Of course there was always the risk of gangrene and there was the constant pain.

Company T/O's fell steadily. Morning reports often carried less than fifty percent authorized company strength, and still no replacements came except for a thin trickle of men hastily gleaned from the over-staffed Air Corps, Medical Corps, Quartermaster or Ordnance, and other rear-echelon outfits. Such men were given a gun, combat jacket, three days of training and sent into the lines as riflemen. They came to the front knowing that they were no better than cannon fodder, and, as such, came swiftly back through the medical chain of evacuation, or slid face down in some watery hole in the black woods of Lorraine.

Finally, towards the end of November, a stream of replacements began to appear and these were the most tragic of soldiers ever to be sent forward to the hard-pressed infantry. Eighteen or nineteen years old, boys still, inadequately trained, inadequately prepared, most of them having no more than three or four months in the army with much of this meager time spent in transit, they arrived to take their places up at the front. Frightened, ignorant of their function as soldiers, much less as riflemen in combat, ignorant of the many skills of battle necessary for survival, they fell like sheep before a starving wolf pack. Some of them lasted an hour on the line, some a day, some of them managed a week while a few, the minority, were able to survive long enough to grow combat-hardened and thus to stand a chance equal to their better-trained comrades.

The advent of these young untrained soldiers was a tragic commentary on their nation's unpreparedness for the war that had been so long upon the horizon. None felt this lesson more keenly than the older men who saw them come and saw them fall. These wiser survivors of combat tried their best to shield the green horns, many dying in the attempt.

When these replacements first made their appearance in the First Platoon's Surgery the teams could scarcely believe their eyes, for these were the broken bodies of youngsters. And they came by the hundreds. Receiving was swamped with casualties. Hundreds of trench foot cases were housed in dark rooms of the old barracks until enough ambulances could be rounded up by the ARP to take them back to the hospitals in Nancy. In the meantime, the daily toll of wounded grew

greater under the pounding guns of the Siegfried Line; more and more men came back on litters as the infantry strove to force the mine fields and pillboxes, clearing a path for the armor.

In the dank and grimy building the medics worked under increasing strain. None of them now had any doubts about what was happening to their commander, yet, oddly enough, they refused to fully admit to themselves and to each other what they could see so plainly. It was as though they could not quite believe that such a thing could happen to this man of iron and so, as one, they stood aside to watch and wait as disaster piled upon disaster and they turned frantic under his lashing fury and the strain of continued uncertainty.

Collier himself wore a look of increasing perplexity as if he, too, could not quite understand. He never smiled now. He never talked to anyone except to issue curt orders or mouth high angry curses that broke from him in inarticulate cries of rage. Everyone and everything could provoke them. His hands shook badly. Even in repose his fingers were constantly moving, plucking restlessly at each other or twitching independently of the rest of his body. Twice more, Lee had seen him completely and sloppily drunk, yet on both occasions he had managed to sober up in time for duty.

Perhaps, she thought dully, it would be better if only he could get hopelessly drunk and stay that way once and for all, deaf to the small voice of his conscience that drove him relentlessly to his table and his work.

Each night was like every other, a steady nightmare of in-pouring wounded, of abusive cursing and angry bickering and mistakes. Hatred and despair found easy victims among the dog-tired, physically run down medics. They were pushed beyond their endurance, and in their weariness, their resentment against their leader spread to resentment of each other. Quarrels of all kinds, trivial and serious, broke out to sweep like a wild flame through the small compressed group. Tension mounted and remained in the wake of each outbreak. The atmosphere was charged with insecurity, and through it all stormed the central and still commanding figure of Edward Collier, as unaware and as unheeding of what was going on around him as he appeared to be of his own personal disaster.

Then, one night, the tension resolved itself suddenly. The platoon had just received orders to move the next day to within a few miles of Saar Union and ambulances had ceased

turning in at the gate. There was only a small backlog of relatively minor cases waiting for surgery, and everyone went to work eagerly to clean up the last of them, knowing that as soon as pre-op was emptied they could sleep. Voices were lighter, more cheerful than they had been in weeks.

Only Major Collier seemed no different.

"Christ!" More than once he'd stepped back from his table to wipe the sweat from his forehead. The first time Lee had been startled and had looked up.

"It's so goddam hot in here!" he'd sworn irritably, stepping back just beyond the circle of lights to stand there a moment, nervously clenching and unclenching his gloved hands.

She stared, not understanding. Why it was cold! Bitter cold in the room! Her own hands were numb and stiff. The icy wind drifted through the broken windows, circled the damp walls and brought shivers along her chilled back and turned her feet numb. Yet, there he stood, sweating profusely as he repeated, "Christ, it's hot!"

This first incident wasn't very noticeable. He often stepped back to flex cramped fingers and arms. The two technicians worked on without heeding but Lee was uneasy even when he resumed his work again. When it happened a second and third time she became deeply frightened and began to watch him more closely, sure that she was witnessing again his futile struggle against a failing nervous system. It seemed to her that his eyes reflected a rising tide of madness. She wanted with all her heart and soul to cry a warning, yet, she was rooted there, unable to act.

Suddenly, the instruments slipped from his nerveless fingers. With one arm he flailed out at the light standard as though to save himself. With a wild thin half-curse, half-scream he threw himself back from the table, almost falling in his violence. For a fraction of a second he stood there staring into the pool of light with blind eyes, mouthing furiously, his hands beating impotently at the air before his chest. His pale face had gone loose and flaccid as if the muscles, defying control, had collapsed beneath the skin. Then he turned and ran, ran stumbling against frightened watchers, crashing blindly into equipment cases until finally he plunged through the door.

No one moved. No one thought to follow as the blundering feet rushed along the cement hall and, seconds later, a door crashed heavily. They stood rooted by their tables, eyes fixed stupidly on the door through which he had just stumbled. For

minutes no one spoke and only the harsh breathing of the wounded sounded in the stricken room. It was as if somewhere out of blackness had come the single crash they'd been waiting for so long and now it had frozen them in attitudes of shock and disbelief.

Finally, a few voices began. Foolish and incoherent, they babbled.

"What happened? Why did he leave?"

"Christ, did you hear him!"

"What? What?"

"Shouldn't someone . . . go after him?"

Several people took hesitant steps towards the door, and then Captain Allen's sharp voice broke across the confusion.

"Corporal Jones, go find Sergeant Morris immediately. Have him send three or four men out looking for the major. Tell him to notify me when they locate him. The rest of you get back to your work. There's nothing you can do. Now then, Lee, let's see what shape you people are in . . ." He moved fussily over to her table and hastily checked her patient. "That's fortunate, anyway. I'll finish this. Only take a minute." He smiled at her complacently, a look of complete satisfaction smoothing away the habitual lines of irritation between his brows.

Now he's happy, she thought bitterly. Now he can say, I told you so!

Somehow, she managed to avoid his smug face until, mercifully, the case was finished and he sent her out to finish the night working in Receiving. Like a sleepwalker she bent to her tasks, while before her eyes lingered an image of Collier stumbling about in the wind and the dark, screaming impotently in his madness.

Then suddenly, the night was done. The Receiving crew and surgical teams went off for a hasty early breakfast and to sleep. Without a word to any of them Lee slipped on her jacket and ran quickly down the now empty corridor to the heavy entrance door. She slipped out and stood on the steps in darkness and wind and rain, listening. But only the wind sighed and beat about her, whirling through the debris-filled streets hidden by the night. Rain dashed coldly against her face, soaking her clothes. Where is he? she wondered helplessly. Where could he have gone out there?

She took one step down and hesitated. In imagination she saw the broken, leaning walls, the threatening, fallen roofs and

splintered beams, the sodden carcasses of dead horses scattered through the debris. She imagined herself stumbling about, lost in darkness and wind, and was filled with fear. For another moment she stayed upon the steps, then turned and ran back into the gloomy hall.

Somehow, he seemed to mock her from the shadows; the howl of the wind following like a derisive cry.

The next morning she learned that Collier had returned during the night, and unnoticed, had gone into the deserted Surgery where he had quietly and efficiently opened the veins in his wrist. Fortunately, Tim Mason, restless and disturbed, had been prowling the hospital, checking on the night shifts. When he saw a light beneath the closed Surgery door he had gone in to investigate. Just in time.

She heard all this from Effie Newcomer whose hoarse voice lowered confidentially rumbled on as they started toward the mess hall for their midmorning breakfast.

"Why? Why?" was all that she could say.

"Why? Hell, kid, how should I know? To get out of the damned war, maybe. Maybe, because he knew he was through. I don't know. We Irish don't fret so over what we can't help, but the Jews are all soul or no soul, you could say. Tim's got him under sodium amytal and he wouldn't let that bastard Joe put a guard in his room. Made the man stay outside the door. Joe's CO, of course, and happy as a peacock with his tail spread. I'm scared it'll be permanent. . . .

"Oh yes, and we move this afternoon. The ambulances are here already evacuating. They'll take Ed back, too. So if it's any consolation, sweetie, he's out of this mess for good!" She broke off, and patted the younger nurse's shoulder awkwardly.

"But to cut his wrists . . . that's not like him. He hated people who took the easy way out!" she cried, still unable to believe it.

"Hell, child, he had to get out! His conscience wouldn't let him take the straight way, the way the rest of us would've gone. I'm no psychiatrist but I figure he was, well, inflexible. He couldn't bend. He had to break. Now look, you quit stewing about him. He'll be all right. This had to happen, understand. Okay, so it's happening and no amount of heart eating is going to change it one jot. Come on, I'm starved!"

Obediently, Lee followed her down the chill corridor, down the ill-lit stairs that led to the dank and smelly cellar where one large room had been converted into messhall and kitchen.

The clatter of tin plates and murmur of voices rose to meet them. As they joined the end of the chow line Lee was suddenly aware of something else. The eyes that touched her were curious, heads turned quickly as she entered the room. Of course. She'd forgotten. The king was dead! Now what would his mistress do!

In spite of herself she lowered her eyes, fixing them painfully on the floor while inwardly she cringed.

"Lee, I suppose you've been told?" Captain Allen looked appropriately somber.

A hush fell across the end of the room.

Without raising her eyes, Lee nodded. Allen opened his mouth to continue when Effie Newcomer turned and plunged into the gap with a bellow. "What time do we move, Captain Allen? Do the nurses go in the second ambulance as usual? God, it's going to be a cold trip!"

Deflected, for he could not resist this appeal to his new authority, Allen began to discuss in great detail the coming move. Relieved, Lee made her escape around Effie and went on to the table.

Tim Mason followed her, placing a warm hand on her shoulder as she sat down.

"Listen, Lee," he said in a low voice, taking a seat beside her, "I've got a favor to ask you. I hate like hell to do it but if you're game I want to try something. If I can only snap Ed out of the state he's in at present I can force Joe to send him back on a medical diagnosis. But if I can't, the bastard's going to insist on an NP ticket and you know what that might mean to Ed, to his future. It would be hell to send him out as psycho though there's probably not much chance of avoiding it. He's damned bad, you know. Won't move, won't talk, won't eat. He's almost catatonic. Still, it's a chance worth trying. If you're game." He paused, eying her gravely.

She nodded mutely, wondering how he could possibly think she could help. A vivid picture of Collier in a catatonic trance, drooping facial muscles, dull staring eyes, shallow breath, confronted her.

"Well, I thought since you knew him better than any of the rest of us he might recognize you and talk. Perhaps, if you just spoke to him, just a few words, he might pull out of it. It's worth the chance, isn't it?"

Again she nodded. What you mean, she thought bitterly, is that because you think I slept with him my approach might

be dramatic enough to snap him out of it. It won't work if that's what you pin it on, you of all people! Yet, she only nodded.

"Well," he said heavily, "it probably won't do one whit of good, still, we've got to try everything. Just don't be surprised or sorry or blame yourself if he doesn't respond. I'm no psychiatrist and I don't know too damn much about these things but it stands to reason that if a man like Ed is treated as an NP he'll soon be one. If he isn't already. To make matters worse, Joe is insisting on a full diagnosis now. We can't do it, of course, but he's bull-headed enough to write up the case his own way and that might do Ed a great deal of harm. You understand what I'm driving at?"

"Yes."

"Game to try then as soon as you've eaten?"

"Yes."

Lee was nervous. There was a cold lump of fear at the pit of her stomach. She was frightened at the very thought of facing Ed. As she followed Mason, upstairs and along the halls to the small ward room where he was confined, she plunged her shaking hands deep in the pockets of her coveralls, clenching them in tight fists. Mason paused a moment to talk to the guard posted in the corridor.

"No sir," the soldier assured him. "When I looked in not ten minutes ago he was just the same. He hasn't moved, I know."

"All right. Thanks, Sammy. Don't let anyone in now. Come along, Lee."

Tim's hand closed firmly over her arm, guiding and reassuring her as they went through the door, closing it softly behind them. Side by side they crossed the dim, unlighted room to come to a halt by the cot set under the single window through which stole the wan light of a wintry day. As her eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, she saw the half-covered figure lying sprawled among twisted blankets. He lay stretched out on his stomach, one bandaged arm trailing limply over the edge of the cot while his head was almost buried from sight in the mound of crumpled bedding. Absolutely motionless, he seemed not to breathe, and he did not stir when Mason cleared his throat and began to speak in a voice that sounded unnaturally loud in the still room.

"Ed. Say, Ed, I brought Lee along with me. She's here. She wants to talk to you. Ed, can you hear me? We want . . ." the

words died away lamely before the impervious, unmoved barrier Collier presented.

Lee strained her ears to catch the slightest movement, to hear the smallest change of breath but heard only the wind shivering against the walls outside, and from somewhere quiet voices carried in gusts and snatches. Within the room itself there was no sound, no sign of life.

Effie's right, she thought. He was out of it now. He was done with her, with all of them. He was safely out of it at last. Still, she took an indecisive step forward. It's too late now, she thought, knowing this instinctively. She felt overwhelmed and powerless, drained dry of the energy to care, yet she knew that she must try. In his way he had helped her many times, in his way he had been kind, and she knew now what she had not been able to accept before: that for many months he had been a sick man. So, forgetting her recent fear of him, forgetting the ugly moments which had first shaken her faith in him, and later shattered it completely, she moved to the cot and knelt by the trailing arm, reached out and touched the rigid shoulder. Behind her, she felt the immense, reassuring presence of Mason. He, too, had stepped forward, waiting. Seizing what was left of her flagging courage, she called his name.

"Ed . . . Ed . . ."

He did not stir. She shook his shoulder gently, and was aghast at the dead inertness of the flesh beneath her fingers.

"Ed, please. Ed, it's Lee. Please, I want to talk to you. I've got to talk to you." Her grip tightened on his shoulder as panic flowed through her. Where was he? What had happened to him so suddenly? Oh how she needed him still! "Oh Ed, please . . . please . . ." She shook him less gently, and her fingers must have communicated some of the urgency that she felt so suddenly and inexplicably, for even as her voice died to nothing he stirred, turning his head slowly, burying his face among the folds of the blanket near her hand while he muttered something muffled and indistinct. Behind her, Mason held his breath.

"Ed, please . . . oh please . . ."

Without warning he reared back on the cot shaking her hand from his shoulder. He raised his white face toward her in the gloom, his eyes tightly closed in the blur of his features. Twice he opened his lips to speak, twice closed them wordlessly. Then, suddenly he rasped out in a flat monotone, dispassionate at first, then turned savage.

"Jesus God, leave me alone! Leave me alone, you goddam bitch! Go away! Go away." The harsh flat voice rose abruptly to a scream. "You goddam bitch, get away! Get away from me!" The scream collapsed in a torrent of obscene incoherent curses.

Stricken with terror, Lee leaped to her feet, backing away from the cot as from a thing of horror. Blindly she moved toward the door away from the rasping cries, the white face reared above the mass of blankets, the mouth a black thing mouthing insane abuse and obscenity. He fell back stiffly, turning his face to the wall, and his curses faded to a plaintive murmur that sounded like the whine of an exhausted and irrational child, until silence once more crept along the damp walls.

Mason put his arm around her shoulders and drew her from the room. Trancelike, she went with him, never hearing his apologies, his reassurances, his long explanation of the illness, the irrationality of ideas and concepts held by the mentally sick. She never heard him, and she never knew what happened next in the hours remaining before the platoon moved from the ruined barracks. When she became really conscious again, the ambulance tires were whirring gently beneath her in an echoing refrain: "You goddam bitch, get away! Get away from me!"

CHAPTER 21

In the week before Christmas rumors came from nowhere to circulate wildly through the First Platoon. Something had happened to the north! Disaster had struck in the form of a gigantic German counterattack, which had advanced into Belgium; perhaps as far as the French border, certainly to Liege. Whole American divisions were cut off, cut to pieces, had surrendered! General Bradley had been captured! An entire Army headquarters forced to make terms! The Germans had a secret weapon which they were loosing over a hundred-mile front!

In Receiving the rumors came with the flow of casualties.

"Did'cha hear about the 106th Division? New outfit, just moving into the line, and wham! The *krauts* ran over 'em with

Panzers. They say they lost eight thousand men. Eight thousand outta one division!"

"Christmas! Wouldna you know the goddam *krauts* would pull something at Christmas time! No chance now for a three-day pass back to Nancy, huh! No chance for nothing!"

"It don't look to me like this damn war will ever end. It don't hardly look like we'll ever get home. I been over here two years now. Two damn years and I'm sick of it! Sick of these damn foreigners, these Frenchies and limeys and bastard *krauts!* If I ever make it to krautland I'm gonna show them squareheads something! I'm gonna tear down everything that ain't *kaput* already. I'm gonna make every *kraut* woman like she's never been made before. By God, I am! I'm gonna make 'em all yell *Kamerad* through their goddam noses! They're gonna pay for keeping me over here in this everlasting war. Aw Christ, but I'm sick of it! Wish't I had a million-dollar wound and a one-way ticket home."

Amid the angry, discouraged and apprehensive babble, a teletype message arrived. The personnel of the First Platoon were to pack and be prepared to move north to the Bulge behind the X Division already on its way across the frozen land. An evacuation hospital came in that afternoon and set up in their field, taking over the patients while their own convoy formed in the early darkness. All available ambulances had been sent north with the division and weapons carriers were substituted in the convoy.

As the men loaded the last of the unit's equipment, the nurses and doctors waited in the evac hospital's kitchen tent, warming themselves over a last cup of coffee. They had worked till noon, and so had snatched only a few hours of sleep before they'd had to turn out, pack their gear and make way for the teams of men striking the tents.

Lee sat on an empty ration box. A thick wall of fatigue insulated her from thought and feeling; it was as if she stood off to one side of herself, watching numbly.

Outside, the December night was filled with the sound of the wind whistling and moaning down from the north, blasting the devastated country before Strasbourg with snow that drifted and whirled over the frozen fields, the dark shattered forests.

Outside, the engines of the waiting vehicles throbbed softly and voices drifted on the wind, distant and muted as though rising plaintively from another world. Hearing them, Lee

remembered Collier standing knee-deep in the dead weeds by a roadside, helmet clutched to his chest as he half-raised his arms in wild entreaty to German strafers flying away.

That had been . . . that had been way back at . . . but her mind refused to sort out the fields and ruined barracks, the undamaged monasteries and battered chateaux of the last weeks and months. It didn't matter. It didn't matter where he had screamed defiance at retreating planes or by what wall he had wept like a lost child.

There was a sudden confusion of sound and she looked up to see the group near the tent flap shifting uneasily.

"All right, let's go!" Allen cried. "Effie, you girls ride the second weapons carrier. Come on, get a move on! All of you!"

Lee picked up her helmet and stood up, pulling the knitted cap tighter over her short hair and settling the helmet on top of it, hating the awkward weight. As she ducked through the flap the chill wind caught at her breath. She gasped, following the others blindly to their carrier. One by one, they climbed over the tailgate, taking their places on the benches along either side. Mason, George and MacDonald joined them. There was a confusion of voices; wheels crunched on gravel, a man shouted frantically somewhere, and then, slowly, the convoy jolted forward.

They settled themselves as comfortably as they could on the hard seats, each wrapped in a blanket to keep out the sharp bite of the cold. From her place by the tailgate Lee looked back but there was nothing to see other than the blackout lights of the following trucks and the small wet flakes of snow whirling in their wake. Sudden gusts struck in feathery dabs of chill against her cheeks, and she shivered, leaning far back, drawing her blanket more tightly about her and bracing herself as best she could against the heavy jolting. It was going to be a long, long trip, more than a hundred miles someone had said, and all of it cold. Perhaps, we'll be all night on the road, she thought miserably, staring out into the snow-flecked darkness. If only I can sleep and pass time away quickly.

Time!

It didn't seem possible that it was almost Christmas. She'd been meaning for weeks, no actually months, to write her husband, yet she had not, not a line. There had been no time, no energy, no thought. What would I have written? she wondered sadly. Of all this? No, for there was nothing she could say that

he didn't already know. It was the same with him; it was far worse with him.

As she sat huddled beneath her blanket she wondered if ever there would come a time when she would return to him, to all the things once known. The thought of going back was like the thought of death, impossible to grasp wholly and just as frightening. She sighed and drew the blanket closer, for the wind was swirling loudly around the now speeding truck, yanking at the canvas top as if it intended to strip it off entirely and leave them naked and exposed.

The others huddled unhappily, cold to the marrow and weary from lack of sleep. Before the prospect of this long road unwinding they were submissive, made so by fatigue. Some nodded in sleep only to be brutally awakened when their helmets crashed against a steel upright whenever the weapons carrier bounced heavily, throwing them from side to side on the narrow seats. No one spoke, no one wanted to compete with the wind or rumbling truck; no one thought it necessary to sing or laugh on the long night moves.

They were automatons, temporarily unwound and allowed to rest while being transported to a new setting where another performance would be required of them. Then, rewound by some hidden key, they would jerk again into unthinking action. They no longer had a sense of destiny, no longer an ideal. Any excitement or anticipation or hope that it might be better out there ahead was gone. The concept of an end to all this was as remote in their thoughts as the memory of home.

On and on their truck bounced, swerving from side to side on the narrow, slippery road now covered with a light crust of snow. Behind them came the rest of their convoy, and behind, other convoys moved forward: forward by inches, by yards, by miles toward the horizon where the big guns were as violent as ever, where men died just as cruelly on the eve of Christ's birth, and where a battle, the greatest of the war, they said, flashed dully, fitfully against the sky.

On and on through the night filled with a howling wind. Time passed with the rush of tires and steady drone of motors. Everybody shivered; their feet grew gradually numb, hurting awhile and then losing all feeling. Now and again someone would shuffle energetically or stamp boots on the floorboards, muffling curses as pain shot through half-frozen flesh. Now and again someone leaned forward to beat his arms across his

chest or bury his face within his hands, breathing out warmer air to take the chill from forehead or nose or fingers.

Staring backward over the tailgate, mesmerized, Lee noticed when the snow ceased, saw the full moon break later over a dark line of hills, a bright cold moon that struggled to free itself from the scurry of storm clouds and bring its wan light into the blankness of the winter night. She was delighted as the cold light flooded the desolate countryside, gathering strength as the wind whirled the thick clouds across the sky. Moonlight bathed the empty shells of ruined towns through which they passed, streamed down the rutted road, traced with shadow and light, which stretched behind them. She could delight in its beauty even among the rubble while remembering a softer warmer moon and the beauty of a far kinder night.

The men beside her cursed the moon and its light, and the German strafers who would be following the roads to seek the shadows of moving trucks such as their own. But Lee had forgotten the Germans, the cold. As she looked back at the gaunt shadows of shattered villages filling the hollows of the land and the ghostly white shells of churches standing sentinel on windy hills, she was quite happy. A cold mist rose above snow-powdered meadows, hovered above winding streams that were strung at random along the valley, streamed wraithlike around small clumps of trees and dark moving bushes, making the earth look hollow and unreal.

They've all gone away and left it, she thought, remembering the deserted look of the cemetery at Thiaucourt, the whiteness of the crosses in the moonlight. There, the two of them had gazed across an empty earth; here, she alone followed the course of light and shadow across an abandoned land.

Why, she whispered, are we all so alone?

The weapons carrier slowed, slued ponderously to one side of the road to come to an abrupt halt that jerked them all erect and awake in their seats.

"What's up?"

"We there yet?"

"Hope it isn't a goddam *kraut!*"

Their voices were anxious, puzzled and then relieved.

"No, it's infantry moving up."

"Then we must be close."

"Yes, we're close. It'll be morning soon."

Lee saw the columns then, moving from a side road; tired, slow and ghost-like shadows of weary men with heavy packs,

steel helmets and rifles slung from shoulders. Beneath the winter-dead trees an endless chain of flesh and steel shuffled along the crusted road with heads bent against the bitter wind and numb hands buried in chill wet pockets. The flesh of their backs and legs must have ached with the bite of the wind and their muscles must have been cramped with fatigue. Endless, endless, shuffling columns marching past with the weary half-slap of boots on the frozen road, infantrymen marching slowly toward the now bright horizon where artillery lit the sky and the noise of barrage reverberated hollowly through the night.

The hospital convoy started up again and advanced cautiously beside the walking shadows. Are they nothing more than shadows on a dark road? Lee wondered. Shadows of men, ghosts of what they once were, empty now of dreams, of hope; shells to shuffle in long columns through the night? Where in all the world now were the gentle hands of love? Where the warmth and safety of home? Where had the days of their young lives fled?

"Jesus Christ, it's cold!"

"My goddam feet are frozen!"

"The captain says ten more miles. Does that make you happy, sucker? Ten more miles and you get a chance at the *krauts!*"

"Oh Lord, even if three mademoiselles were loving me up all at the same time I'd still be cold!"

"Easy there, boy. What's the matter? Feet? Hey, Sarge, here's another frostbite."

"Close up. Close up, men."

"Christ, will you listen to that artillery! I heard the *krauts* weren't taking prisoners. You hear that, too? They say they shot a whole bunch of 'em out of the 106th."

The hospital trucks moved steadily past the marching columns. Tanks and artillery pieces rushed ahead; jeeps and motorcycles darted by, speeding up the dark road. Sometimes, the platoon paused at crossroads to let armored columns or truck convoys filled with soldiers pass. Often, as they waited they could hear shouted commands and curses, the creak and groan of equipment.

Lee drowsed. She was so weary that she could not sit erect. She huddled forward, head upon her knees, cold face sheltered in wool-gloved hands. The steady rising rumble of the guns echoed in her ears.

The moon was gone, swallowed at last by the thick over-

cast, and beneath it the earth trembled faintly. The sky ahead grew alive with the color of war and the wind hurled snow once more across the land, snatching sound, bringing the barooom of the guns into hearing with renewed fury or carrying it away to be lost in the drifting snow.

Once Lee thought she heard a closer, sharper rattle of firing somewhere ahead, a rising crescendo of sound that died away a moment later. She woke more fully, and when the convoy halted moments later, she heard someone cry out excitedly, "Strafing ahead! Bed-check Charlie just checked in!"

Moments later, they moved slowly past a few burning trucks in the ditches, the crackle of flame loud in their ears and the smell of burning heavy and sickening against their nostrils. The fitful flames ate at the charred and skeletal wrecks and lit up the garish scene as the traffic crowded past. On the bank nearby were stacked four or five dark bundles, sodden tattered jackets flapping gently in the wind, bright hair and dark stirring lightly above the white blur of faces frozen in agony or surprise.

For them the road had unwound its course and reached its end. Beyond, in the east, the light was coming, but for them it came too late. The wind of death had preceded dawn, had come rushing, hurtling to meet them here in the middle of this dark road so pathetically near its end.

CHAPTER 22

The man on the cot across the aisle was fighting a losing battle for his life. His breath rasped hoarsely in the almost silent tent and his body convulsed at intervals. The gray pallor of his face shone luminously in the twilight gloom.

In the shadows of the sloping wall of the Shock Tent Lee sat quietly, her shoulders drooping with weariness. She was only half aware of the dying man on the cot across the way and of Mason and a corpsman tending him. She sat, on an empty cot and did not once lift her eyes from the face of Bill Stainer on the cot beside her.

His face, too, was pale beneath the stubble of a beard and the accumulated dirt of many days. The whites of his half-

closed eyes showed faintly beneath parted lids while his breath hurried and whistled in his chest. An olive-drab shirt, unbuttoned at the throat, covered the top part of his motionless body while the blanket was pulled away at the bottom to expose one leg stretched out stiffly in a bloody plaster cast; the other ended abruptly above the knee in a neatly bandaged stump enclosed in a small protective wire cage.

Lee had looked once at this stump and had not looked again. The odor of stale blood and pus mingled with the fetid stench of pain's dank sweat rose from the cot while the sweet penetrating smell of ether seemed to exude from the very pores of his skin.

When she had first seen him, when they had first called her out to Receiving, saying an officer was asking for her, she had thought it must be someone else, someone she might have known in England or Normandy. But when she had knelt by his litter, of course, there had been no way to push the truth aside. She had been forced to look down into his face, drained and gray with pain and loss of blood.

"Hello . . . Lee . . . honey," he'd whispered. "Ain't I a . . . mess?"

Last night. Only last night. So quickly, so surely, so irrevocably.

She had settled the anesthesia mask over Stainer's agonized mouth. His eyes had closed obediently and she had gone to work with Allen to whose team she was now assigned. And it was Bill's leg that a corpsman carried off an hour later in an empty C-ration carton to be buried.

The cot on which she now sat heaved suddenly. She raised her head as Tim Mason lowered himself heavily beside her. With a sigh, he placed his elbows on his knees and bent forward to massage his head between his hands.

"Goddam it to hell!" His voice was muffled and indistinct. "I'm going psycho, baby! This is getting too much for me. That poor devil over there hasn't a chance! All of eighteen and scared as hell to die. Who isn't? Who isn't? Ah, it goes hard on an old man like me to watch these kids die. Damned hard!"

She glanced sideways at the gasping, convulsed figure in the gloom and felt nothing.

"Well, time to catch my breath," Mason mumbled and looked up at her. "Better go get your sleep, kid. You can't help him yet, you know. I'll call you when he comes out of it."

"I'm not sleepy, Tim. He ought to wake soon. . . ."

He shrugged, his eyes straying to the young officer's face. For a moment he remained silent, dangling lifeless hands between his knees, his gaze unseeing. It was too damned easy, he thought dismally, to understand what had made Ed crack up. Too damned easy to want to get out of this mess at any cost!

"Will he live, Tim?" she repeated the toneless question a second time.

"What?" He roused himself with an effort. "Oh, young Stainer? Yes, he'll make it all right. He's lost a lot of blood and he laid out there in this blasted weather too damn long but he's doing as well as we expected. He's strong, got plenty of stamina, and I've been pouring the whole blood into him. The only thing . . ." he hesitated and she continued softly in his stead:

"The only thing is that he'll probably lose his left leg, too?"

He shook his head irritably. "Well, there's always hope till it's gone. But I'm afraid he will. Tell you what though, kid, old Joe did a damned fine job on him. Almost as good as Ed could have done."

She agreed listlessly. "Yes, I know. He's a good surgeon."

"It's not so bad then, working on his team? I tried my best to keep him from switching you, but he's so damned pigheaded and . . ." he fell silent as her mouth set unhappily. He sighed and rose clumsily to his feet, stretching his aching back and arms a little as he turned back to the dying soldier's cot.

"It's not simple, this damn war!" he muttered, staring down reflectively at the body that still struggled for air and for life. The lines of his own broad face resumed the form of a grim mask mirroring the hopelessness of this battle being fought on the hard canvas cot.

Lee heard the harsh rattle as it filled the tent five minutes later and a shudder rippled through her body. She waited, tense and listening and filled with a deep revulsion. Fleetingly, she was aware of the wind sighing among the stovepipes and ropes and someone singing out in the fields, a deep voice carrying across the snow. No one spoke in the tent. One man sighed heavily and someone else lit a cigarette, the match scratching loudly in the waiting silence. Coal crackled briskly in one of the potbellied stoves at the tent's center.

Lee looked down at her hands locked together in her lap. They were thin and chapped, the quick, nervous fingers interlacing. The gold wedding band caught the light, winked

grandly in the shadows. She twisted it slowly around her finger trying to remember what had prompted her to take it from her dog-tag chain and place it again on the third finger of her left hand the day Ed Collier had been evacuated. That, she thought, seemed an eternity ago.

Again the harsh breathing choked on a horrible gagging sound. She moved restlessly, wanting to jump up and run, wanting to run and run until there was nothing but sunlight and warmth and beauty all around her. Frantically, she desired to go backward into the golden sunlight of another day, and to have the comfort of a living hand.

Oh God, to be out of this stinking, shadowed tent! To get away from these frosted barren fields and the nights beyond the pounding guns, beyond the sound of idling ambulance engines and lungs that were collapsing.

With lowered head she sat and stared at the dirt beneath her boots while every muscle of her body grew rigid. She clenched her hands in two tight fists, the tendons ridging across her reddened knuckles, and waited as the others waited until the silence was complete.

Then she raised her head and saw Mason standing there, his hands hanging limply at his sides, his gaunt shadow weaving hugely on the sagging canvas wall. Something of his posture held a painful, almost comic note, as if, at any moment, the big doctor might lift his head, draw back his lips and howl. Yet, he opened his mouth only to call for the litter bearers. Then he swung away from the cot to stalk blindly between the rows of wounded men and halt beside another litter where whole blood bottles hung and oxygen tanks hissed softly.

Slowly, the tent came to life again.

On the cot before her, Stainer stirred uneasily and murmured unintelligibly. She looked down to see a shadow flit across his pale face and one hand reached fretfully for the caged stump of his right leg. She caught his fingers gently, holding them tightly in her own because pain was stirring now behind the curtain of drugs and ether, and his muscles began to twitch and jerk with each stab of it along his nerves. With her free hand she stroked his stubbled cheeks and pushed the dirty hair back from his hot forehead. His cracked lips parted again as he mumbled wearily, turning his head fitfully from side to side. A little saliva worked between his lax lips to roll down his unshaven chin. She rose and hurried off to Mason's desk to wet a four-by-four from a canteen there, and returning

placed it across his lips. He sucked at it instantly, his mouth puckering eagerly, and the restless movement of his head ceased.

And now what shall I say to you, she wondered, staring down into his slowly waking face. What are the words I should use to tell you, my beloved, that for the rest of your life . . . the rest of your life you'll be a cripple, a thing without legs, young still and without legs. How shall I say that?

There was precedent enough. She had said it more than once before. "Last night, in Surgery, we were forced to amputate. Yes, your leg. No, above the knee. You'll be able to walk again, of course, in time (we hope). I'm sorry . . . sorry . . . sorry."

Meaningless words and cruel and spoken before other faces pale with shock, before other eyes that stared in sickness and disbelief, and they had never been spoken easily.

What must I say? Oh my darling, how can I say it?

His eyes opened suddenly, looked up directly into her own.

And the cry that broke through her lips and hung an instant between them was anguished and forlorn.

In the lonely hillside monastery on the road leading north from Arlon, Belgium, toward Bastogne, the chaplain led the men in singing carols under the eaves of the steep slate roof which topped that barren pile of stone. At midnight, a monk came to the open bell tower, his cassock flapping in the wind as he mounted the rickety wooden ladders to the bells. At midnight, across the frozen fields the sound of their tolling rang faintly through the still icy night, and even the guns to the north were silent, as if by mutual consent. A lone plane passed over the ancient town of Arlon, its motor droning faintly in the high still air.

Across the frozen hills soldiers of both sides heard the bells ringing for the centuries-old festival of good will toward men. Perhaps, some of them could even envision the old monk in his wind-plucked robes standing in the shadows of the narrow tower, pulling, releasing, pulling, his gaunt figure bending, straightening, bending as he sent the big bells swinging to roll out their mellow notes on the wind.

More certain on this Christmas Eve of 1944, men blew on numb fingers by the icy lips of their fox holes and cursed bitterly, or crouched in the steel cockpits of their tanks that

were cold as the tomb, and half-sobbed their anger and their longing as the bells echoed in the distance.

In the small Surgery deep in the monastery's cellar where they worked feverishly under the lights, the teams heard the faint noels led by the chaplain drifting down through the dank halls of stone. At midnight, they raised their heads to listen briefly and in wonder as the first notes of the bells pealed from the tower to penetrate clearly in their subterranean depths.

"Christmas!"

Lee thought of it as mockery and was untouched by the faintest pang of nostalgia. Christmas; and so it was Christmas, she thought, as her eyes rested briefly on the massive swollen feet of the man stretched on the second table, black feet protruding grotesquely from the draping sheets which must not touch the frozen flesh. For weeks now these blue-black gruesome appendages had been a common sight. Trench foot, frostbite, frozen feet, by whatever name the medical tags might call it, this affliction meant the same excruciating pain to the countless winter casualties who came hobbling into the platoon with the help of a buddy or arrived on blanketed litters.

"Christ, they tell us to change our socks every day! Take off your boots when they're wet, soldier! Don't sleep in 'em! What the hell do they think we're doing up here? Living like the goddam rear echelon? How the hell can a man change his socks when he's only got two pair and hasn't seen the supply truck in two weeks? How the hell can he take off his boots when they're wet? They're wet day and night! Oh sure, the *krauts* are gonna hole up in them woods while we sit around changing our socks and letting our boots dry! And don't you know them quartermaster bastards are wearing the shoepacks we was supposed to get just like they wore those lined pants and combat jackets last fall! Every last driver on the ration trucks is all tricked out in combat gear! I seen 'em, I tell you."

The carols drifting down the cold, drafty corridors were lonely sounds, and the men lying on litters waiting near the door of Surgery shifted uneasily on the hard, stretched canvas, pulling their single blankets over shivering shoulders as they listened. Off to the south the lone plane made one last circle over the darkened town and droned off to the east.

"You wouldn't think we'd still be here, would you, Joe? They said we'd be home for Christmas; they damn well said this stinking lousy war would be over and we could get the

hell outta this damn country. By God, for Christmas, they said! Ahhhh!"

"Send the medic! Please, somebody, send the medic. I'm hit. I'm freezing. Please, somebody . . ."

"Hear them bells down yonder? South, ain't they? Sounds sort of pretty on the wind, don't it? Makes a man wonder what his wife is doing, and the kids, huh?"

"Merry Christmas, you bastards!"

"Shut up, you goddam fool! There's *krauts* over there in those woods, I tell you! You want to invite 'em over?"

"Yeah, they're pretty all right, those bells. Once't down by the Moselle we had to take a town and every time we started in some goddam Frenchie rang the bell in the church, see. Then the *krauts* would let go with a bunch of mortars. But we had to take that town. They were pushing us to hurry from battalion. Christ, I can hear that damned bell yet! Clear it was, louder than those down there and everything else quiet, see, until we started in and that bell would ring and all hell break loose. Lost a lot of buddies in that town. Don't care a hell of a lot for the sound of bells anymore."

"Look at those Tigers! See those shadows moving out of the woods! There! Over there, damn it! Jesus God, man, don't get out of your hole! Hey, don't . . . don't!"

The haunting lonely bells pealed across the snow-covered fields and dark forests, silent save for the sudden crack of a limb breaking under its load of snow and ice. Suddenly, the clear distant ringing was drowned by the quick blast of a bazooka, the answering heavier crash of tank guns as the lumbering Tigers emerged from the long edge of a wood.

The wounded on their litters in the dim cold halls heard the faraway sound of firing not quite drowned by the bells above their heads and they stirred again uneasily, muttering, raising themselves on their elbows to listen. Goddam it, on Christmas!

Shivering, they lay back, resting their heads on clasped hands, drawing the blankets tighter beneath their stubbled chins, and with pain-bright eyes watched the shadows of the corpsmen flicker along the walls. They listened to the guns with a feeling of guilt and relief and shame. Out beyond the thick damp walls of the monastery, only a few miles across the wind-swept land, other men, their buddies, lay shivering and coughing hollowly in the cold, watching with weary eyes

as the dark shadows moved across the snow, lurching slowly closer, black guns spitting red flame.

And the wounded listened to the sound of this firing mingled with the mournful echoes of the now silenced bells and were moved by a sorrow few men ever feel within a lifetime. A sadness compounded of the never-never land of childhood, the shadowy country of it-might-have-been made nostalgic and wistful by the constant proximity of death when men are still young, and by the cruelest of personal suffering endured beneath the flash of artillery, among the snow-covered mounds of frozen men, comrades of these days, now dead.

That man can endure so much and his sacrifice be so empty and so mocking!

CHAPTER 23

The snow melted first in patches, freeing the dry dead tufts of grass, the small clumps of low bushes that moved dryly under the cutting winds. January brought a thaw all along the frontier countries, an unseasonable warm spell that cracked the hard crust of snow and bared the long frozen hills surrounding Bastogne. Scattered in the forests and fields were exposed bodies. In many a dark patch showing among the still-white fields, torn uniforms flapped dismally in the wind and white, set faces were pallid in the mouldy grass.

Silence reigned here among the shattered hulks of tanks, blackened half-tracks poised on the rim of hills or half emerged from the shadows of black forests. The quiet of death sat hunched beneath the dripping eaves of old dugouts. The war had advanced far to the east now, leaving the barren, churned battlegrounds of Bastogne and Wiltz, of Malmédy and Saint-Vith, and a dozen smaller towns, to boom and crash on the eastern edges of Luxembourg.

Here, the guns of the Siegfried Line pounded rhythmically from the woods of finely ordered rows of firs, and American infantrymen stormed the pill boxes and tank traps of the last German line of defense west of the Rhine. Soon the shattered towns of Aachen, Prüm, Düren and others were to testify to the malleability of Aryan brick and stone and steel before the onslaught of Allied planes, artillery and riflemen.

The First Platoon, following the X Division forward, moved out of the ancient monastery, moved south and eastward into Luxembourg where they set up again in a castle every bit as damp and dreary as the Belgian retreat. Though the pressure and tension of the Bulge was over the backlog of patients remained high enough to keep the teams working in constant twelve-hour shifts so that there was no break still from the overwhelming weariness that gripped them all.

Lee Caine tried her best to resign herself to the high, thin voice, the fussy ways of Captain Allen. In spite of everything she disliked about the man, he was an excellent surgeon. Yet she continued to grow more tense, more nervous.

Allen's constant gibes and sly insinuations tossed so casually in her direction rasped her already strained nerves, leaving her often shaking with helpless anger or on the verge of equally helpless tears. She grew more and more morose and sullen, and her self-control was so far gone that several times during the gruelling weeks in Belgium she had been reduced to tears.

Finally, on the edge of desperation, she asked Effie to put in a request for a transfer from the unit, only to have it returned a few weeks later: request denied. This was the final blow! She felt that now there was no escape, and the heart went out of her. Captain Allen professed himself insulted by her lack of gratitude, but by now Lee was beyond control. Her sullen anger flared openly, bringing further harshness and discipline down upon her. Even Effie Newcomer was forced to issue cautionary advice and, finally, a direct order to mind her manners and her attitude before the men. This only served to intensify Lee's certainty that everyone was against her, even her old friends. She felt that now that Collier was gone they were showing her their true feelings; that all along they had hated her, that all of them believed that she had undoubtedly been his mistress. She felt sure that they sniggered and suggested, whispering the same old stories behind her back.

Under this growing confusion of her thinking and the constant tension of work, she grew progressively quieter and more withdrawn, avoiding the others as much as possible, even refusing to attend the infrequent unit parties that celebrated their brief periods of rest. In a way she welcomed the almost steady flow of casualties for they carried her through the required twelve or fourteen hours in Surgery without time for thought. Often, when duty hours were over, she stayed on in the deserted Surgery cleaning up this or that, or occupying

herself by making up bundles for the sterilizer or stacks of fresh four-by-fours.

Often, too, she wandered out to Shock or Receiving or the Post-op Ward, and finding some of the men on whom her team had recently worked, would pause to speak to them, and sometimes stay for hours listening to their talk of combat or of home. In this way, she left no time for thought and grew so tired that she knew she could sleep. Often, too, she went off alone on long walks through the black, silent forests covering the hills behind the castle. Walking down the endless rows of firs she became so physically drained that her legs would shake with fatigue and her body seem light and hollow. Only then would she feel it safe to seek her cot.

There were times, though, when even these stratagems failed her and she found herself staring at the ceiling, waiting for sleep that would not come. Instead, countless images spread across the cracked plaster: Collier's white face and shaking hands beneath the light; Collier screaming in that small dark cell of a room, faces of dead soldiers, faces of men who were dying; Captain Allen's sneering, knowing smile; the bowed figures of refugees along the roads going west; children's faces, pinched with cold and hunger; Bill Stainer opening blue eyes, recognizing her slowly as she bent above his cot; a hundred too vivid pictures rising unbidden and unwanted to sicken her soul.

Somewhere, she felt sure, Collier stared blindly at a blank, white wall and plucked with thin nervous fingers at anything and nothing.

And Bill? Once, she had seen a man in Denver who sat on a little trolley on one of the busiest corners, a sawed-off stump of a man without legs who sat all day on his trolley and sold newspapers to people hurrying past above him, a grizzled, ugly, unnatural dwarf whose huge red hands gripped wooden blocks with which he propelled himself back and forth. His broad shoulders had been permanently hunched, his big torso strained by years of effort. Now her imagination placed Bill's handsome sullen face upon that misshapen body, harnessed his lean hard strength to that trolley to be exposed and shamed before the indifferent crowds.

And her husband, what of him? He remained as vague and nebulous as ever. She seldom found him in her thoughts.

She was certain that there was nothing she could do for any of them and this view brought her some relief. She told herself

that she need not bother, her conscience could rest. She knew that when the war was over she would not seek Stainer in some overcrowded veteran's hospital. She knew that she would never see Ed Collier again. As for Bob, her husband, she pushed him farther and farther into the background of memory. Her first obscure need to clarify the confusion and conflict the three men had created for her died away, and the harder she tried to think clearly or decisively about them the more weary and indifferent she became. She even began to hate them a little for imposing on her emotionally. It did not occur to her that this was very much the way Collier must have felt before his breakdown.

February brought chill rain to melt away the remaining patches of snow. The deep, black forests dripped ceaselessly, and once more the roads were slick with mud. Small border towns crumpled one by one, their ancient charm disintegrating into piles of rubble. At Eisenach, in the Third Army sector, the gates of Germany were cracked and shoved ajar, and even as the days of February moved past, the gates swung open. Third Army troops broke through the battered town of Trier and began their incredibly swift advance on the Rhine. Tanks lurched through the great gaps blown from the endless dragon's-teeth fortifications that marched across the gray hills. Riflemen swarmed past blackened pillboxes which seemed to have settled wearily into the muck now that their purpose was served. Infantrymen hastened past the tremendous litter cast aside by the fleeing enemy in the network of trenches and connecting underground corridors of the forts, past hundreds of wooden crosses driven into the ground, by cement walls, planted in endless groves beside crumbled blockhouses, wherever the defenders of the much-vaunted German line of defense had fallen.

The First Platoon moved into the small town of Simmern, situated almost dead center in the Moselle-Rhine triangle, and it was here that Lee received word that her husband was starting home for the States.

"Of course, I had to be a hero and volunteer for another tour," he wrote, "but fortunately they turned me down. Oh, I knew I was safe enough. They want fresh blood out here now. Us old men are getting shelved one by one. Guess we're only good enough now to go back and train the kids. The Flight Surgeon mumbled something about accumulative operational fatigue and the rehabilitating effect of a duty tour in the States.

I could have kissed the old bastard on his crummy chin whiskers.

"So I'm coming home. In fact, my darling, I'm packing at this moment. And the best news of all! They tell me that when I get back I can apply for your return. You have to start proceedings from that end and I, Stateside. Get on with it, honey. Time's a-wasting. It's been years . . . and Christ, darling, I want you so. . . ."

Slowly, painfully, she reread his letter. She was numb with shock. He was on the way home . . . how odd! He'd survived after all and even now was starting home. But she hadn't dreamed that could be possible. She hadn't thought anyone anywhere would *ever* be starting home.

She sat in the recessed window of Receiving and folded his letter into smaller and smaller squares while her thoughts wandered from his news to him. She tried hard to visualize him; to conjure him there before her in the quiet room but, as so often before, he refused to materialize. It was as if he had retreated behind the sullen, boyish face of Bill Stainer and a dozen other vivid, more immediate images.

"I must have time. I must have time to think," she whispered.

Dazed, she stared out over the shining roofs of the town spread below this schoolhouse that was sheltering the platoon. The wintry sun shone brilliantly on slate and tile and cobbled streets.

Go home? Go home and find him waiting at the docks? What would he say? What would he even *look* like? What would she say to him?

A wave of panic washed over her. It was insane to even think about it. She couldn't go back. Not now. Not yet. There was still work to be done; the war was not yet ended. Besides, she couldn't; she knew that she couldn't go back and face him. It even made her feel a little sick to think of that moment of meeting.

Yet, home . . . street lights and busy, noisy cities, luxurious hotels and people who smiled and laughed and talked of many things outside these narrowed boundaries of the war. Home! The longed-for end to this damned road, and yet so dreaded and so remote. Oddly, so unbelievable.

A huge blue Navy LC went past in the narrow street below her window, drawn by a clanking tank remover. A young sailor sitting happily above the dust on the raised deck saw

her on the open sill and waved his white duck cap. For the Rhine crossing, she thought absently, folding the letter one final time with nervous fingers. Soon, the Rhine, and then on into Germany and somewhere, at sometime not too distant, perhaps, the end. It was impossible to leave now. No, she couldn't go home, not yet!

Eastward, eastward into the enemy heartland, rolling bumper to bumper over the *autobahns* past thousands of ragged, defeated German soldiers who were finding their own way back to the Prisoner of War cages as best they could. Unfed, unwashed, they straggled through the long grass of the magnificent highway's center strip, their dull eyes staring in dreamy disbelief at the mile-long convoys of Sherman tanks clanking by or at the tremendous lines of supply trucks heavy with ammunition or rations cases or gas. Above their heads, the Transport Command's C-47s, in flights of threes, flashed by at treetop level carrying rations and gas to the distant forward units of the American armies. Beaten *Wehrmacht* soldiers rested in small exhausted groups on the grassy banks of the roads and watched this powerful invasion of their homeland. Here and there, grotesque piles of shattered rifles and abandoned equipment testified mutely to their surrender.

Occasionally, more enterprising POWs commandeered some of their own now useless vehicles and came sputtering down the *autobahn* with huge white flags of surrender flying from the bumpers. Soldiers of the two nations, the victor and the vanquished, cast curious glances at each other as they passed and only seldom did animosity flare in their equally weary stares.

Casualties came in lessening streams to the First Platoon. Soon they were working ten-hour shifts, then eight, then only six. The case load of the surgical teams dwindled to next to nothing. Because she must work, Lee volunteered to share the post-operative ward shift. She enjoyed, in a way, this time on the ward. She liked to listen to the endless stories of combat, to the wry, bitter humor and constant griping, and time passed for her, time passed for them all, and suddenly it was spring.

One morning in April as she stood idly by the mess tent watching crows circle the muddy field, she heard a runner from the Headquarters Tent shouting the news. The president was dead.

Roosevelt dead! The word was spread by special bulletin over the AFN. It seemed impossible here with the war almost done, with the Allies deep in Germany, rumbling along Hitler's *autobahns*. But the voices stated it bluntly. There was no mistake.

"He's dead, I tell you! If you don't believe me go on over to the Orderly Tent. Sergeant Cassidy has the radio on. Yes sir, he died last night."

Fingers snapped in the listening tent. "Just like that! They say it was a hemorrhage, a cerebral hemorrhage. Quick, like that!"

"I voted for him. Hell yes, I voted for him. It seemed like to me he was the only one knew where we were going and why. I'm no Democrat but I voted for him."

"It's a hell of a shame he couldn't see this!"

The voices were bewildered, only half believing still.

Roosevelt couldn't be dead! Not when the end was so near; not when the world waited for the coming of his statuesque figure darkly caped with large silvered head bared. Not when they waited for the rich, magic notes of his voice to tell them the way now that they were almost finished with war and ready again for peace. It wasn't right that such a man should die on the dawning of another day.

Out beyond the field of tents where the soft spring rain pattered slowly to turn the broken German roads to muck, convoy after convoy went thundering past on the *autobahn* heading east, and columns of heavy tanks went clanking loudly over the countryside, rolling victoriously through hundreds of small towns where bedraggled sheets flew from every window and sullen people peered from the shadows of their shuttered homes. The war was almost over, yet, in its closing hour, a great man had died who, with all his faults and human errors, spoke of mankind in a voice that held sincerity, spoke of humanity with kindness and understanding and compassion.

CHAPTER 24

By the end of April the First Platoon had moved far east and south, down through Richard Wagner's country at Weiden and Bayreuth, skirting the low green hills of

Czechoslovakia to the Danube. On south and east again, crossing the lesser Danube at the still smoking city of Regensburg where freight cars burned in the bombed railyards and dead German soldiers lay scattered in the fields at the city's outskirts, mowed down in retreat. Eastward, paralleling the Danube now to the smashed town of Straubing the platoon set up its hospital in another field beside still another road.

Lee was working on the ward early one May morning after coming off a brief shift in Surgery. Rumors had been flying through the hospital for days; rumors that the German High Command had surrendered their country and the fighting had officially ceased; rumors that the Russians had captured Hitler; rumors that the war was over in fact, and only needed the announcing. To the south, along the Inn River, it was said that the fighting had stopped a week ago when the Americans had met Russian forward elements in Austria. Yet ambulances still turned into the field bringing a few sniper and shrapnel casualties.

As Lee worked that morning she listened to the talk of the men. One boasting voice was especially loud:

"Aw, come off it, Harry. You know damn well we didn't take prisoners either! Hell, our old man hated the *krauts*. He gave orders, see, way the hell back in France, that we wasn't even to bring the bastards in unless they was needed for interrogation. He said why should we let 'em live to get shipped back to the States and get fat! He said why leave 'em alive to shoot at us in another twenty years. Hell, we didn't care. We knew we wasn't out on any damn church picnic!"

"Your CO is a goddam fool! You think the Germans didn't know when you weren't taking prisoners? You think they didn't know you were shooting them down the road? Hell yes, they knew! And by God, what do you think happened to every poor devil of a GI that got caught from your regiment, and for that matter, from any outfit in your sector? Well, I'll tell you. He got as far as a hundred yards down the road toward the *kraut* CP and brrrt, right in the back. Same as you were giving the *krauts!* We knew when they were shooting prisoners, didn't we? What in hell makes you think they didn't know it, too? That brass bastard leading your outfit ought to spend more time in a hole and watch the way his goddam theories work out in the line before he shoots off his damn mouth and acts so God Almighty tough!"

"Now wait a minute. Who started this shooting prisoner stuff in the first place?"

"I don't know and sure as hell you don't either. We could have started it just as easy as the *krauts* and chances are we did. But it doesn't matter anyway. It just got started and you don't have to try and tell me we're any different than they are. I've been up there too long."

"I'll tell both you fellows something. I know when *we* started shooting POWs. My company lost a platoon to a Panzer outfit in the Bulge and most of the boys were captured. We could hear 'em hollering *'kamerad!'* in a stand of trees over the hill. When we got our tank support and shoved those Tigers off the hill we found our buddies, lined up nice and orderly and every last one of 'em shot through the head. That's when we started getting 'em out of sight and shooting their blasted guts out!"

"All right I can match that one. Back on the Moselle, and that's a damn far way back, we get a new officer, a brandnew second lieutenant straight out of OCS and full of beans. He thinks he's God's gift to a rifle company. All right. So one day we take a bunch of POWs and that lieutenant says to take them into a room in a farmhouse we're using for CP. He wants to interrogate 'em. Sure, he wants to interrogate them, with a carbine.

"We heard it. Like shooting ducks in a gallery. The guy wasn't even neat about it. Comes out smirking all over his face and says they didn't answer his questions so maybe they'll answer St. Peter's. Okay, it's done. Maybe we feel a little sick about it, but it's done and the captain, he don't find out about it until it's too late. Well the *krauts* take that town back half a day later and you know what they find stacked in a room and full of lead? And what do they do? They line up every Yank they got behind their lines and stick a bullet in his head and every GI gets himself caught that day and a damn lot of days later is as good as dead. All because a fool officer had to prove what a man he is, how tough and all that bull and gotta shoot prisoners to make us believe it!"

"I heard about that deal I bet. Didn't they court-martial him?"

"The lieutenant? Hell no, but one of the boys got him in the back one night on patrol. None of us trusted the bastard, we were damn glad to get rid of him. Hell, he's a hero . . . lost in action."

"Did they get him?"

"Who?"

"The joe that shot him?"

"Naw. He went psycho. Doing time in a closed ward in the States I guess. About the same thing, huh?"

"There's something else. If you shoot prisoners and they know you're doing it they won't give up for nothing! They stay in their holes and take as many of our guys with them as they can. It's damned foolish to let 'em know they're as good as dead if they surrender, ain't it?"

"Hey, what's the racket?"

"Jesus, sounds like all hell broke loose!"

"Nurse. Say, nurse, what's going on?"

Lee straightened and stood listening, a washcloth dripping in her hand, while the man she had been bathing struggled to his elbow, his gaunt face startled.

Out beyond the tent wall voices were shouting, boots were splashing through the mud. Someone, somewhere was blowing the horn of a jeep.

"Why I don't know. Isn't that odd . . ." she began when a hospital corpsman burst into the tent followed by half a dozen others.

"Hey you guys! It's over. Hey you GI joes!" the first man shouted as he dashed down the length of the ward between the cots, grinning and waving his arms furiously. "Hey, soldiers, the war's over! The *krauts* gave in! Honest to God, guys, it's over! The *krauts* have quit!"

He came to a breathless halt, seized Lee by the arm and shaking her wildly, bellowed at the top of his voice, "It's over, Miss Lee! The goddam war's all over! Honest to God!"

There was a second of quiet as the men on the cots struggled to grasp it. Then thirty voices began to shout and curse and laugh as one. The war was over! The blasted war was over! The walking wounded scrambled to their feet and ran shouting, dancing about the tent. The men stretched in their casts and bandages, propped themselves on their elbows, wriggling their free limbs with delight, all talking at once with shining eyes and mouths flung open and arms and legs struggling to express the sudden release and the joy.

It was over. Jesus Christ, it was done! The whole damn stinking war was finished! Oh brother, we'll be shipping home. We'll be shipping home! Home! Maybe next week . . . maybe next month. God Almighty, it's over, it's finished, it's done!

And here and there a man lay back quietly with the thought, lay back with shining eyes and lips that trembled in the echo of the louder joy. It was over. They were free. They could go home.

The corpsmen threw their arms around Lee and kissed her heartily, one after the other. Laughing, some of the ambulatory patients followed suit and then rushed on their way to join the milling, shouting crowd in the field outside. Laughing, pushing them away, Lee could hardly believe this huge and sudden completion of effort. She sat down suddenly beside the man she had been tending.

"Oh God," she whispered, staring at his exultant face. "Oh my God, it's over."

CHAPTER 25

The greater Danube has its birth in the ancient city of Passau where the three rivers meet: the gray-green Danube pouring down from the rapids and narrow basin at Regensburg; the Inn flowing from the south along the borders of Austria; and the still and placid Ilz drifting down from the north. The Nieder and Ober Schloss of long-dead kings commands the river junction, its gray imposing turrets and cliff-like walls rising from the banks of the Danube while across the water the spires and towers of Passau are black against the green hills edging the river valley.

The streets of the city are narrow and cobbled, twisting and circling from one small market square to another and around the grim, buttressed walls of dark churches and cathedrals. Along the river's quay, open-air markets, a tradition for centuries, were still in operation at the end of the war. Produce-laden barges tied up beside each other along the stone wharfs. Kerchiefed *hausfraus* hurried down from all corners of the city, clutching their string bags or large unwieldy baskets, to join the throngs that gathered before the seller's barge or stall.

Across the bright-green Inn lies Austria, and though the ancient stone bridge with its once-imposing entrances had been dynamited by the fleeing Germans, a Bailey had quickly spanned the broken sections and a tremendous volume of traffic

flowed through the narrow streets of Passau on its way to the route leading southeast along the Danube's banks to Linz, and on past Linz to Vienna.

In the second week of peace, the First Platoon was withdrawn from Straubing and sent down to Passau to join the other two platoons of the X Field Hospital, now camped in tents along the banks of the Inn south of the city. Here they were on rest and relaxation status until further notice, which everyone interpreted as meaning until they received their shipping orders for home.

For the first time since they had left England in June, the hospital was a whole. For ten days they sat about, washed clothes, hiked over the countryside, swam in the river, took jeep and truck rides into Austria, down to Salzburg and Berchtesgaden, down to Gmunden to the beautiful lake backed by the grandeur of the Alps and marred by the horror of one of Germany's worst concentration camps, down the Danube to Linz and the Czech border, or back to the battered remains of Munich and its lovely outlying resorts of Starnberger See and Tegernsee.

At first, Lee thought that she was happy. The suddenness of the end, the tremendous relief from the pressure of work had brought to her, as it had to the others, a sense of elation and euphoria. She threw herself wholeheartedly into the business of relaxing. She went off on all the trips, she swam in the Inn, rode *Wehrmacht* chargers over the hills above the city, where the view of the Danube cutting through its valley and the dark city of Passau was an unforgettable sight. Often she wandered alone in the ancient streets, intrigued by the shadowed oldness of the cathedrals and squares.

The X Division, in charge of security for the area, had its headquarters in Passau and innumerable invitations for dances and parties were issued to the fourteen nurses of the hospital. Lee went again and again, meeting a few familiar faces, a handful of officers left over from the early days in England who had either been lucky enough to remain on Division staff or who, after seeing line combat, had been transferred for some reason or other and were, as it actually seemed, reprieved men.

But as the days slid by, she began to grow restless. She was possessed by a great store of dammed energy, which sent her irresolutely and furiously from one pursuit to another. And, in spite of all diversions, her thoughts revolved faster

and faster about the future, the day when she must go home. Irrationally, even as she yearned for that day, she dreaded it more than she had dreaded anything in her life.

Restless, growing more and more disturbed, she went out alone during the day while in the evening she let herself be taken to the dances, the parties, with the drinking and the laughter, thinking that she was happy. She would be happy, she *must* be happy for the war was over, wasn't it? With one young officer or another she would drive off in a jeep or C and R car through the early evening to Passau.

Pale, somewhat dumpy women watched with sullen faces as they passed. Sallow bare-kneed men in greasy *lederhosen* and battered army caps turned set sharp features expressionlessly in their direction. The old and bent, worn and bitter, stared from dingy sagging doorways while the kids raced after the army vehicles with bare dirty feet slapping on the cobblestones and high shrill voices crying after them.

Twilight would be drifting down the Danube as they crossed to the other side where the houses and chateaux of the rich and famous were built among the hills rising steeply from the river banks. The mellowness of the spring evenings would soften the grim, dark city behind them, bringing beauty to the thin, black spires flung up against the deeply blue skies and the faint, rosy bank of clouds that hung like distant mountain peaks beyond the ancient fortress town.

There was something haunting about those late spring days with the sight and sound of the river slipping on and on, down to Austria, down through Linz and on to Vienna; there was something of past grandeur and past beauty that excited Lee and brought great unease and restlessness. She wanted, then, with all her soul to follow the river, to explore the ancient depths of dark cities, to listen to the strange voices of foreign people in the early nights, to go on and on in curiosity and delight through the heart of Europe, on and on through the charm and misery of strange lands. She would never go home. She would follow the river into the Balkans, on and on into the east. She would wander and listen and feel again. And a painful longing would fill her soul.

And that night in the Nieder and Ober Schloss she would drink a little too much, turn maudlin and far too affectionate, and return to the hospital sometime in the early hours of the morning, dazed, mussed and sick with nausea brought on by liquor and self-disgust. She did not know how she was going

to handle the future, and equally, she did not know what to do with the present.

Then, one morning at breakfast, Lieutenant George dropped the bombshell of rumor.

"Did you hear the news? We're shipping out."

"Shipping out? When?"

"Yeah, we're shipping all right. We're being redeployed to the Pacific, if you can believe that!"

"Redeployed? To the Pacific? You're crazy, George!"

"Wait and see if you don't believe me. Why do you think the colonel's having Officers Call this morning?"

Turned morose and sullen by this rumor, the officers and nurses crowded into the kitchen tent to hear its official confirmation. Looking faintly harassed, Colonel Simons delivered the news as tactfully as he could:

"Officers and Nurses, the X Field Hospital has just received orders to embark from the European Theater of Operations for another theater. Now I know . . ." and he held up his hand as a deep sigh flowed through the tent, ". . . I know that many of you are disappointed but I need not remind you that our country is still engaged in a bitter struggle with Japan, and that as long as one partner of this infamous team remains unbeaten all of us must think first of our country, its needs and security and then . . ."

"Christ, but the Old Man is eloquent this morning!"

"We are to proceed without delay to the staging area at Marseilles where we will await shipment to our destination in the Pacific. Now I know none of you expected this. We have, after all, almost three years of service in the ETO as a unit and to us, especially those who have been with the outfit from the beginning, this seems quite enough. Let me remind you then that there are many hospitals who have been here as long and longer, and obviously we cannot all go home. Therefore, let us face this as cheerfully as possible.

"Now please . . ." for a low angry murmur had begun and was traveling swiftly about the tent, ". . . please listen a moment. Some of you are going home. Certain individuals will be detached from the unit at Marseilles and sent home. Those who are over-age; those who have families that need them at home; those who have served the longest overseas—these individuals will be notified in Marseilles. If there are any among you who feel they have a just and hitherto unknown cause for transfer, please see Lieutenant MacDonald at once. No passes will be

issued after twelve o'clock noon tomorrow, for we are to report at the Linz airfield Tuesday morning at 0800 for our flight. Are there any questions? No? Well then, dismissed!"

Angry, excited voices broke behind him as he turned and walked out of the tent.

"My God, I'll never get back to my practice!"

"Once they get you outside of the States nobody cares if you ever get back! I hate like hell to write my wife about this!"

"Oh hell, another couple of years on some stinking island!"

The disappointment among the nurses was less violent but as keenly felt. "I don't see why they had to pick on us!"

"Oh Lord, Captain Newcomer, what will I do? We've got more than forty days still to wait before our marriage permit is okayed. What will I do? Yes, I know, but he . . ."

"Wonder what kind of uniform issue we'll get now? I guess I might as well give that tweed suit back to the English. I'll never get to wear it now!"

Lee walked off across the sunny field alone, unable to deny the overwhelming feeling of relief that had rushed over her at the colonel's announcement. For only one moment she allowed herself to think of her husband waiting there alone, of his disappointment and anxiety, but the sense of sheer relief wiped away the lesser traces of any other emotion. She was only glad that she had more time, that she need not face him yet. There would be time now to straighten things out in her mind, time to forget Bill Stainer and try again to remember her husband. She would write to Bob now, promising nothing, planning nothing, deciding nothing. She had time now.

Almost happily she went off to write her letter.

The X Field Hospital spent eight weeks in the dusty staging camp just outside the city of Marseilles. Two torrid months of waiting for their ship while thousands of troops poured into these areas and thousands of troops poured out again, going home. High-point men with Purple Hearts and clusters, Bronze and Silver Stars, or just big families who laughed or sneered at those being redeployed, waiting only for a ship and some God-forsaken island in the sun.

There were queer flukes and oversights in the regulations that brought men cursing bitterly against each other and each other's branch of the services. Redeploying infantrymen cursed the Air Corps ground crews who were given battle stars because the planes they serviced flew in combat although they them-

selves might be sixty or a hundred miles behind the lines or even sometimes, all the way back in England. The rifleman with two or three campaign stars, all earned in combat on the line, might find himself relatively a low-point man and thus bound for more combat in the Pacific. The discrepancy between the battle stars of the ground combat troops and those of the Air Corps, and some other rear-echelon outfits, grew stark and glaring. For the former these stars were hardly ever earned without an accompanying Purple Heart, for the latter they might mean anything including warm billets in buildings, hot food, liquor rations, warm clothing, and most important of all, not even the sound of firing artillery.

Shrapnel-scarred men suddenly found reason in the small purple ribbons and sneered good-naturedly at family men whose children at home became of value all out of proportion to the place they had held in the lives of their fathers during combat. Five points now, each child earned them five points that could mean the difference between a short trip home or another struggle for survival halfway across the world.

Riflemen, medics, air corps, engineers, quartermasters; men who had spent years in Iceland, England, Africa, Italy, Sicily, France, now came swarming to the dusty plains around Marseilles and spent their final weeks in Europe waiting for the ships that would carry them home. The redeployed, most of them comparative newcomers at the game of war, watched them go with envy and with longing. Down in the smoky bistros of the waterfront areas fights broke out between the groups.

Symphonie and *Je Reviens* and *I'm Gonna Take a Sentimental Journey;* smoke and murk and women and liquor in abundance and next week or the week after, a ship sailing for one of two parts of the world. Sooner or later that ship would come and a man could laugh or a man could weep.

In the last few days of July a ship came for the X Field Hospital. The weather held hot and dry as they embarked, leaving the sun-bright city among the arid hills where the Notre Dame du Jardin brooded over mariners that touched these blue shores. Lee was quite happy as they pulled away from Marseilles. She spent the days on deck gazing out at the brilliant Mediterranean and sunned herself luxuriously as they steamed slowly toward the gates of the Atlantic. On the second evening they slipped past the Rock and the sunset formed a straight pathway of gold when the ship set her bow

into the ocean. Standing at the aft rail she watched the shores of Europe recede, and as she watched the dim line of land fade into the falling night she felt no regret, no longing, no nostalgia for the years she had spent there.

The days at sea passed slowly. Languid days of rest and boredom and to Lee, at least, a balm to restlessness. Then, one day, the peace was shattered ruthlessly by the sudden blaring of the ship's loudspeakers.

"Now hear this! Now hear this! Officers and Men, the war in the Pacific is over! The Japanese have announced their desire to negotiate for peace! A state of armistice has been declared!" Stunned silence fell over the mess hall where hundreds of officers were still eating their noonday meal.

The speakers blared again.

"Now hear this! The war with Japan is over! The course of this ship is being changed under orders from the United States Army in Washington. We are now proceeding to the port of Boston. Now hear this! We are now proceeding to the port of Boston!"

A mighty, engulfing cheer rose from hundreds of throats as the men and few nurses sprang to their feet, shrieking, waving, pounding each other's backs, embracing, drowning out the raucous croak of the speakers in a wave of wild abandoned joy. The war was over! Over and ended! Finished everywhere on earth! They were done with it now. They, too, were done with it now and going home. Home! Oh Christ, home. Boston, he said! Boston! Jesus God, did you hear him? The war's over. We're going home.

Men wept. They laughed as hot tears streamed down their glowing cheeks. From the deck below, in the enlisted mess there rose a huge confusion of roaring cheering men, two thousand homesick men, while through it all the loudspeakers continued to boom impotently.

"Now hear this! Now hear this! We have just changed course! Ladies and Gentlemen, Officers and Men, the captain of our ship wishes to make an announcement. Then the ship's chaplain will lead us all in a short prayer. Soldiers, Officers, our captain . . ."

"God Almighty, home!"

"Officers and Men," the solemn voice blared hugely, penetrating the hysterical melee of voices and laughter, "I have just given the order to proceed to Boston. Even now you may feel the ship shifting course. We are heading north and west

and we will put into Boston harbor in approximately four days. And now the ship's chaplain, Chaplain Gordon . . ."

"Did you hear that? Boston in four days! Oh Mammy, here I come!"

"Four days! Jesus, wish I could tell my wife!"

"Dear God, our Heavenly Father, we thank Thee . . ."

The voices died away, heads bowed slowly as the sonorous voice rolled over the crowded decks. Tremor after tremor of excitement passed through the taut, listening bodies as they stood and waited, only half hearing the words of thanksgiving and prayer, only half understanding.

"Father, we thank Thee for this final deliverance. We, the survivors, are spared by Thy mercy. We, the survivors . . ."

"To those who are no longer with us today, oh Father, we offer our solemn pledge. . . ."

Four days . . . Boston . . . and home. What will I say? Lee cried inwardly. Oh, what can I do? The war is ended everywhere on earth and I am glad. But now there is no time and I cannot, cannot go home.

The night was still. Only the gentle swish and break of waves passing along the ship's side, and the soft tinkle of gear caught by the wind disturbed the quiet. Laughter occasionally broke from the dark deck well below and died away. It was late. Or rather, it was early, for the dawn was on its way. The sea stretched into the distance in an unrippling sheet, and its gentle swell moved faintly upward and sank and rose again. Limitless, restless yet infinitely calm.

She could be so easily lost out there. No one would ever miss her; no one would ever know exactly where she had gone. A splash, a second of comprehension as the cold water closed above her head and then she would be alone, the ship's lights riding away swiftly. Alone to bob about a moment or two and then be lost in the huge gray waste of heaving water. There would be only the sky and the wind whispering over the sea, over the limitless stretches and she, alone. As the lights rode away and left her all the world would be hers for a moment, the stars, the dark night, the sea; all hers for the space of a moment. . . .

She shivered slightly, pressing closer to the rail. Was that the answer then? Was that the answer for weary bewildered brains that saw only fear in the future, were filled with strange, incomprehensible dread of something, everything?

She raised her head and felt the wind along her cheek. Was life so precious? The eating and the drinking and sleeping and love making, the pain that goes with pleasure and the inescapable knowledge of death behind each shadow of existence? Was life something to be held at all costs until age came and death more easily?

Yet, she thought, what am I so afraid of? Why do I fear Bob, myself, everything?

The sea whispered silkily against the steel plates below her. She leaned far over and watched the fluorescent waves comb gracefully along the ship's side and listened to the fascinating whisper, a rustle that seemed to lure, to call out to the limitless rise and fall, the eternal restless movement of loneliness.

It would be so easy. No one was on deck nearby and the splash wouldn't be loud. So easy to slip between the rails, to let go and be alone in the sea. Alone! Trembling, her mind alive and possessed by a spasm of nervous excitement, she gripped the rail with both hands and stared out at the graying water, the fading night. It would be the easiest way of all to escape, the easiest of ends to confusion and fear and hate and guilt and betrayal. Betrayal . . . ah no. She moaned aloud, wanting to cry like a lost child, wanting to weep, sorry, sorry lost thing she had become.

Yet, no tears came. Tears, like everything else within her, had dried up long ago. She could not weep any more than she could hope or love or sorrow. It had been many months since she had been able to weep for anything or anyone and she could not begin now by weeping for herself.

And why should I? she thought. I, the least hurt, the least scarred? There were tens of thousands of men going home who were maimed in one way or another and surely she was the least of these.

Her mood of despair lifted a little and she felt an old humility, for the knowledge of her luck carried its own brand of guilt and made even a momentary self-pity seem baseless and indulgent. She could feel sorry for them, for Bill, for Ed, for all the men of the road inland, but not for herself.

The wind freshened suddenly, the sharp tang of salt blew up from the sea to touch her senses and instinctively she moved along the rail toward the bow. No . . . no tears, she thought. I'm going home. And she turned her back abruptly on the rail and moved toward the black oval of a bulkhead door and her compartment.

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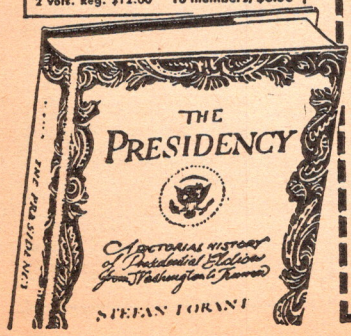
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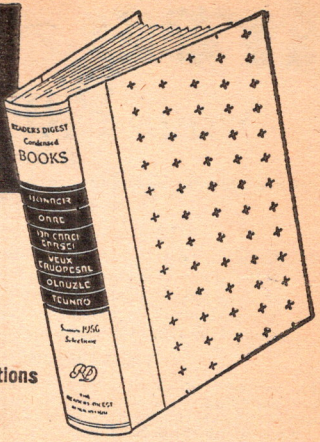

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ear, which clout, she decides, is the "best moment" she has

AN HISTORIAN'S APPROACH TO RELIGION. By Arnold Toynbee. 318 pp. New York: Oxford University Press. $5.

By JAMES A. PIKE

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